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FALLING UP

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English

San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirement for the Degree

Master of Fine Arts

by

Sarah Seymour

December 2008

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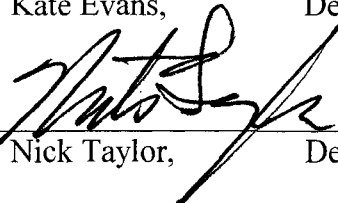
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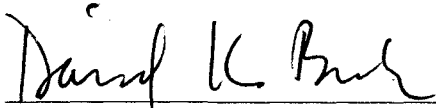
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## ABSTRACT

### FALLING UP

by Sarah Seymour

*Falling Up* is a linked collection of short stories about exploration—both literal and symbolic. Each story follows the character Marty as she tries to find her place in the world. She explores the psychological and spiritual aspects of herself in different locations—from Wyoming to Bogotá and back—as she comes in contact with various people, situations, and challenges. The pieces of her journey shape Marty over time. The outward journey becomes the inner journey.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to thank Kate Evans for putting so much time into helping me finish this collection.

I also want to thank all those people in my life that inspired me to write these stories.

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*I like songs about drifters - books about the same.  
They both seem to make me feel a little less insane.*  
--Modest Mouse

## Introduction

Falling Up is a linked collection of short stories about exploration—both literal and symbolic. Each story follows the character Marty as she tries to find her place in the world. She explores the psychological and spiritual aspects of herself in different locations as she comes in contact with various people, situations, and challenges. The pieces of her journey shape Marty over time. The older Marty serves as narrator and reflects on her travels and connects them with her own inner journey.

For this collection, I draw from a wide range of influences, including travel writing, philosophical writing, linked story collections, and memoirs. Many of my influences clearly parallel an outward journey with the inner journey of the narrator or main characters. For example, in The Dharma Bums by Jack Kerouac, Ray travels from San Francisco to the Sierra Mountains to Desolation Peak in the Cascades as he learns the way of Zen Buddhism from his friend Japhy. Hermann Hesse also intertwines the inner journey of his characters H. and Siddhartha with their outward journey in his novels Journey to the East and Siddhartha. In both cases, the characters learn that it is not the destination of the outward journey that they seek, but instead they must realize the importance of their inner journeys. Marty begins to make similar realizations along her journey—she is not going to find herself or gain much wisdom in the perfect niche. Instead, life is about discovery as she physically moves through the world.

The themes of lightness and weight evoked in Milan Kundera's The Unbearable Lightness of Being are also reflected in my collection:

The heavier the burden, the closer our lives come to the earth, the more

real and truthful they become. Conversely, the absolute absence of a burden causes man to be lighter than air, to soar into heights, take leave of the earth and his earthly being, and become only half real, his movements free as they are insignificant. (5)

Kundera's characters Sabina and Tereza represent the concepts of lightness and weight. Tereza is burdened by the heaviness of love and attachment to her husband, whereas Sabina does not let herself become attached to any person or place. Sabina betrays men who fall in love in with her; she flees countries when she feels the burden of attachment:

Yes, it was too late, and Sabina knew she would leave Paris, move on and on again, because were she to die here they would cover her up with a stone, and in the mind of a woman for whom no place is home the thought of an end to all flight is unbearable. (125)

In my work, Marty experiences the burden of attachment to place and to people at various points in her travels. In the story "Big Sky," Marty's life becomes so intertwined with those around her she feels the burden and weight of their lives—a feeling she never thought she would experience from living a life on the road. Marty also experiences a lightness beyond what she thought possible in the story "Southern Cross." After Marty is robbed of most everything she owns, she takes off for Guatemala with nothing but a postcard and only a vague idea of who or what she is suppose to find there.

Not only are my influences thematic but they are structural as well. The structure of my stories is that of a linked collection. Amy Tan's Joy Luck Club and Melissa Bank's The Girls Guide to Hunting and Fishing are linked collections that have recurring

characters appearing over a span of time. Though each story can stand on its own, the collection as a whole reads like a novel. Concerning linked collections, Michael Chabon stated in a *New York Times* interview:

A group of linked narratives can create an effect you can't get from a novel or from one story alone...It's like a series of snapshots taken over time. Part of the pleasure is turning to them again and again. The interest lies in what has happened in the interstices. (10)

The linked collection structure allows readers to zoom in on specific moments in a character's life over a course of time. Each story slows time down so readers can experience these moments, and with a collection of these moments, readers get a full picture of the character over time. Whereas Bank's collection zooms in on love relationships and Tan's collection on the relationships between people in a Chinese American community, my collection explores those points in Marty's life where her travels illuminate her inner development.

My collection also has a memoir quality to it similar to that of Eat, Pray, Love by Elizabeth Gilbert and Travels with Charley by John Steinbeck. In both memoirs, we follow the writers on the outward journey as we experience their inner journey with them along the way. In Gilbert's book, she studies different aspects of herself in different settings—indulgence in Italy, devotion in India, and balance in Bali. In each section of her book, she takes note of how her location ties in to her development as an individual—the changes she undergoes and what she learns in each place. In Steinbeck's book, we see him interact with various people and places across the country trying to capture the

essence of the United States. His own personal journey becomes that of discovering America from the road. In the introduction to Travels with Charley, Jay Parini states

Steinbeck himself felt that contact with the land and its people was important to him as a writer; he wanted to see the natural landscape, to hear the voices of ordinary men and women at work and play. These experiences were like fuel to his imagination, and without them he felt abstracted, detached, impoverished. (x)

Like Gilbert and Steinbeck, I draw from my own personal travel experiences to bring Marty and her adventures to life. Marty's travels, told from a first person point of view, reflect her personal inner journey and struggles. As she makes her way from location to location, she also discovers not only new aspects about herself, but she discovers the wonders of place.

Each of the stories in Falling Up captures the aspects of travel, the inner/outer journey, linked story structure, and memoir voice, illuminated by these literary influences. As Marty journeys through the world, the reader experiences her journey—the newness of her surroundings over time and place as well as her changing struggles and views on life. Change is a journey. As is life.

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## Shooting Stars

*Don't underestimate where you are at anytime.*

--Cactus Pears

The universe is no longer up there—it's all around us. I try to find constellations in the mess of light. If you've never experienced a clear, moonless night in Wyoming, you couldn't possibly comprehend how many stars there really are. The black of the sky vanishes between the specks of brightness.

David looks at me and hands me a beer. “Killian's?”

“Why not?” I say and give him a good hard look as I take the beer from him. I can't decide if I like the way he looks—his hair is too short, his eyes are too close together, and I find it annoying how he always tucks in his shirts.

He gives me a funny frown as though I have no business studying him so closely. We've only known each other a month, and in another two months, we will go our separate ways. Maybe I shouldn't look at him so closely.

I sink down into my worn green fisherman's chair, dig my old, black dusty boots into the hard dirt, and try again to find formations in the much too bright sky. Somewhere along this odd path of existence that was set in motion for me, I decided this idea—that the brightness of stars engulfing the nothingness of the universe—was the metaphor of my life. I'd written it down in a old notebook under a section I labeled *notes*. But at some point else along this path, I changed my mind because I decided that it really didn't make much sense. As each chapter of life unfolds, everything begins to morph. The metaphors always changing. In college, I had taken notes. I knew *things*. *Things* made sense. Now I take notes on life. Nothing makes sense.

“Marty, look. Cassiopeia,” David says shattering the absolute stillness of the night.

He points toward the sky and waves his finger in a W, but nothing stands out at me. A shooting star slides across the sky. Shooting stars are a warning of change. I know this because I've seen thousands. Back in November before I graduated college and left that tiny Greek town in Ohio for the open road and a summer of working in Yellowstone, I didn't just see a shooting star; I saw an entire goddamn meteor shower.

\*\*\*

Waking up in a tent next to David at dawn leaves me feeling a little nauseous.

“God damn, I need coffee,” I say and kick my legs up and down a couple times to get the blood circulating. I struggle to make my way out from under the warm blankets and out of the tent. The glaring sun slaps me with bitter cold brightness. I've been bitten by a star. I jog laps around the tent to keep warm and recite every constellation I know I as loud as I can.

“Orion...Scorpius...Draco...” When I was in the third grade, I bought a sky map and memorized all the constellations. I still remember most of them though I can't remember why I needed to know them all.

“Would you calm down,” David says and pokes his head from the tent.

I don't stop; I yell louder. There's probably not another person in a fifty mile radius from where we are camping—the half way point between the eastern entrance to Yellowstone National Park and Cody.

He emerges from the tent when I finally wind down. We stand there and take in



the landscape—the dirt brown dry brush and tumbleweeds, motionless in the still cool morning air. In a couple hours, the dry July heat will hit us. Rocky dirt stretches out before us in every direction—mountains loom in the distance. Desolate. You never really understand the word until you see desolate. Empty, breathable air.

\*\*\*

Wyoming is the least populated state, yet it has one of the highest suicide rates. Years later on a mid-January night somewhere just outside of Laramie—traveling through on my way to Missoula, Montana, I really begin to understand this mindset. *I hate it here*, the girl at the hotel front desk tells me in the most defiant way, *they say we are in the mountains, but do you see any mountains out there? I sure don't*. And she points out the front door. Layers and layers of white powder fall from the sky, dance in the wind, and light up the night the way the stars or moon might. The city sits high on a plateau. Of course she can't see mountains. No one can from this angle.

\*\*\*

The afternoon sun sings the already dead patches of grass throughout the town of Cody—Rodeo Capital of the World. That's what it says on the sign coming off Highway 16 into town—Welcome to the Rodeo Capital of the World. Everyone who lives in this town is a cowboy—do cowboys gravitate to Cody or does moving to Cody make you a cowboy? I shouldn't think about these things too much, but I can't help myself. Once the mind has been trained to analyze everything, it's hard to reverse what it has done for so long.

Buffalo Bill. Bars. Bulls. Bison. Barb wire. Our day in Cody. We have been

sucked into a wild western tradition dimension. David and I stand outside the Stampede Grandstand. With one hand, I play with the ends of my braids that hang down against the front of my once-white Fraggie Rock baby doll t-shirt, and I try to flag down scalpers with my other hand. A man with an entirely too large silver belt buckle sneaks up on me.

“Anything for you, blondie,” he says.

The rodeo is a cross between prom night, the Kentucky Derby, and NASCAR—girls in too many sequins lead horses around the inner ring while sloppy, drunk men hoot and holler at them from the grandstand. The scalper sells us tickets for seats in different rows. David sits one seat below me. My knees rest on his back, and I stare at the back of his head. There is nothing distinctive about its shape or the dull blond color of his hair which is so short it just pokes out in fuzzy spikes. I don't know him really. I'm thousands of miles away from anyone I know. You never really know anyone you meet on the road—these fleeting relationships, friendships. David is not many things to me, but he is a reliable hiking companion. And he takes me places I find reasons to fall in love with—strange places like ghost town Virginia City, Montana and wild west heaven Jackson, Wyoming. That's all I really need here, now. I think it is anyway. Like dreaming, once you wake up, move on, it's hard to grasp what was once there. With time, it becomes easy. Memories and pictures are timeless.

I press my knees hard into David's back. He turns around and glares at me.

“Just checking to make sure you're still there,” I say. “Thought you might want a shoulder massage.”

“With your knees? No thanks.” He turns back toward the bucking bull.

The crowd goes wild. The clown jumps upon the rail separating the crowd from the ring and dances a jig. At that moment, the whole scenario becomes my new metaphor for life. Another one I realized later on didn't really make much sense.

\*\*\*

We pull our fisherman chairs up the hill behind the cabin we rented for the night. With a bottle of Jameson between us, we settle in to watch the explosions of color against the already lit sky. Fireworks—man-made shooting stars.

David's vague outline presses against the night around us. Put anyone there. A sinking numbness settles in my stomach. David shifts his attention toward me and smiles. I turn my head quick. I don't want to look into his eyes. I don't want him to kiss me.

The first time David kissed me was two weeks ago after our first hike together to the top of Avalanche Peak. We were shin deep in snow until we pushed our way above the tree line where the landscape became rocky and where we realized we had lost the path. *Fuck the switchback*, I had said and began to scramble up the rocky side of the peak—David at my heels. I stopped in abrupt breathlessness when I reached the top. Vastness stretched over the mountainous volcanic land, dark clouds settled beyond the peaks west of us. I felt lightheaded, dizzy, high. I grabbed David and pressed my lips into his—a non-kiss, and then spun in circles until I fell and slid down the snowy rocks on my ass. The cold, jagged rocks ripped at the back of my jeans numbing me as they slid me along. Lack of oxygen compels one to act rashly.

That evening after the hike, David and I found ourselves lounging against the

back of a big log behind our work dorm, Columbine, watching the storm clouds move toward us—thunder and lightening having their way with the atmosphere. He kissed me then. Uneasiness came over me—a sinking numbness in my stomach and over my body. The same uneasiness I feel here, now. Cody, Wyoming. *Where am I?* A question that jolts me, but reoccurs over and over through time and places. The sensation of facing the unknown loses impact. *Where am I? I am here.*

\* \* \*

The next morning I shower for the first time in three days. A dirty film runs off my sun-kissed olive skin. Since I've been in Wyoming, I've taken to not bathing regularly. I rationalize in my notebook that cleanliness is for those who lead clean lives and that my life is messy. That one still makes sense to me. College, thousands of miles of road and places and people, odd jobs, seasonal jobs, more road, places, people. I have lived a million lives in this one lifetime. *What comes next?* I've gotten use to messy.

We pack my car then walk around the remnants of the holiday in the warming mid-morning air. The street vendors are packing to leave. I buy a black and purple silk scarf for my hair from a woman who looks like she's never been settled for more than a week in her life. Her gypsy clothes flow with her body as she shows me how to wrap the scarf in my hair.

"I'm going to be a wandering tarot card reader in my old age," I tell David as we walk away from the woman.

He gives me a blank stare. What does he care? He won't know me in my old age. He won't know me beyond this summer.

“Wandering tarot card reader,” David says and turns his gaze back toward the street. “Buy yourself some tarot cards and get an early start.”

David will be a junior this fall. He studies chemical engineering at Michigan State. His life is still in one piece.

\* \* \*

It takes almost three hours to drive back to Old Faithful Village, where we are living and working for the summer. Only once do we have to come to a complete stop because of bison. And it's not even the bison that stop us; it's the Bison-Brained Tourists—those who will stop their vehicles in the middle of the narrow two lane highway to stare. The second most dangerous move next to actually trying to pet a bison.

The surreal landscape stretches in every direction through the Park and beyond its outer realms—from the ragged edges of the Teton Range to the south and Beartooth Range to the northeast to the bubbling volcanic ground of color between Old Faithful and Mammoth Villages. I wonder about the people who are born in the area—what do they see, are they in awe? Do they step outside each day and appreciate the clear, clean air and vast expanse of space around them? It's easy to overlook the wonders around you when they are all you know.

\* \* \*

Mid-July. David and I drive to Castlerock in the Gallatin Valley just south of Bozeman, Montana halfway between Gallatin Gateway and Big Sky. Highway 191 weaves along the Gallatin River between the crevasses of the mountains. As David drives, I watch from the window the fly fishermen, the white water rafts, and the kayaks

having their way with the river.

Several weeks earlier, David and I went white water rafting on the Gallatin with my roommate, Lisa, and her co-workers from the Snowlodge dining room. The end of June is about the last good week of rafting for the season—the river lowers, the rapids diminish. Our guide narrated the entire trip like we were on a damn ride at Disney World.

“There's the Brad Pitt Rock,” he told us and pointed to a large rock jutting out of the river near the edge. “Brad Pitt stood on it when they were filming *A River Runs Through It*. Any of you girls want me to guide the raft over there so you can stand on it?” He winked at me.

“Why don't you stand on it,” I told him. “Roll around on it and giggle. Give us a trip to remember.”

David and Lisa and crew cracked up. The guide avoided eye contact with me for the rest of the trip.

I laugh out loud thinking about it now. David looks at me.

“What's so funny?”

“Nothing,” I tell him and recompose myself. I get better dealing with flashes of memory over time and experiences. Something will remind me of another time, another life. Sometimes I divulge to people I think will appreciate it. Most of the time I don't.

We park and set up camp then hit the trail. The hike is fairly short—only six miles round trip. David and I hardly speak. We let the surroundings speak to us—the lodgepoles, the grass, the deer, the moose, the elk. *I am no longer in college. I no longer*

*have a home. Where am I? I am here. Who am I?*

Reincarnation. It's an obsessive theme that begins to knock on my brain within the first mile of the hike. When there are no more tests to study for, no more papers to write, no more wild nights with friends at O'Hooley's or Casa or the Union, subjects like this slip into the brain while walking through an unknown vast land in silence. *Who is David? Who was David? Who am I? Who was I? What Karma has led us to this juncture? What purpose does it serve?* This is just the beginning. Once you begin dabbling in the matters of Eastern Philosophy, you tend to push it as far as your imagination will let you. Every person that crosses your path is now significant. *Why has the Universe pushed our paths to a crossroad? What am I suppose to learn from it?* Thought patterns begin to connect the dots and add up in ways that before were meaningless. Every move you make, every person you meet will affect your destiny.

After the hike, we drive to Gallatin Gateway for dinner at the Gourmet Gas Station—a typical Exxon Station with an attached five star dining room. In the bathroom, I brush off my dusty worn jeans and wash my face. I stare at myself in the mirror; I can't decide if I look healthy or not. Without makeup, the dark circles under my eyes sink back into my face—I look like I haven't slept in months. But I feel energetic; I feel *alive*.

I walk over to our candle lit table and immediately look at the wine menu. The Most Extensive Wine List of Any Exxon Station in the Nation it says across the top. Indeed. I order a bottle of cheap red wine for David and me. David, only 20, shares a glass with me when we go out to drink.

Six women sit at the table behind David. They break into shrill giggles every two minutes. Gift bags scatter their table—it must be a shower or a birthday of some sort. I try to eavesdrop—something about a husband, a penis, and a water bed. Then an eruption of giggles.

“Jesus,” I say to David, “if I ever become anything like that, I hope someone shoots me.”

David gives me his famous blank stare. “Stop being cynical,” he says.

*Cynical.* I try to picture myself among the women at the table, laughing with them, enjoying their sense of humor. But I can't. I picture myself rolling my eyes at their jokes and cursing the decisions I had made in life that led me to that moment.

I sleep under the stars that night and try to find the zodiac until I fall asleep. It is too stuffy inside the tent with David.

Our weekend is over. We leave early the next morning to get to work on time—to sell some gift shop junk to the tourists. We listen to a live Fleetwood Mac album, as we wind our way southbound on Highway 191. I decide that every song on that album is a metaphor for some aspect of my life. *Oh Lindsey, Stevie, Christine! You understand!* I play “Sweet Girl” three times before David tells me, *enough*. I sing “Tusk” in my most demonic voice at David until he says, *would you stop it*. The album burns in my memory. The metaphors slowly fade.

I stare at all the little white crosses we pass along the highway. I try to count them. I wonder about them. *Who were they? What happened? Who are they now?*

\* \* \*



Lisa had invited too many people to our room while David and I were away hiking for our weekend. The always musty room now smells like stale beer. Empty beer cans scatter the room and sloshed daiquiris stain the floor. A boy I've never seen before lies in my bed drinking a bottle of Jack Daniels through a straw reading my copy of *The Rum Diary* from my Hunter Thompson collection. He glances over the rim of the book and smiles at me. My look of exasperation must have jarred him to react.

"Good book," he says, "is it yours?"

"Who are you and where's Lisa?" I ask and cross my arms over my chest.

He sits up and swings his legs over the edge of the bunk. His mess of mucky brown hair hangs down over his sleepy blue eyes. "I'm Ryan. I work in the Hamilton Store. And Lisa was here earlier. Left with some guys. I don't know. I was too enthralled with this book to leave."

We stare at each for a good minute before I finally tell him I'd like to have my bed back.

"You can have Lisa's bed," I tell him and point to the bunk below mine.

He sighs and climbs down. "Can I borrow this?" He holds my book up with no intention of handing it over to me.

I'm too anal about my books, my music, everything. I'm not sure how to tell him —*no, please leave by books alone; I am not a library.*

"I'll bring you one of mine," he adds.

"Oh yeah," I say as I climb into my bunk, "what do you got?"

"Kerouac. Got all of 'em. I'll bring you one now." And he's gone before I can

respond.

*Kerouac.* A dizzy sick feeling comes over my body. *Who was Kerouac? Who is he now?* I lie on my bed and look at the pictures on the wall my bed presses against. Postcards from places I've revisited again and again—fishing villages along Lake Erie and on the coasts of South Carolina and Florida. Posters from local college bands I love hang among the postcards. A picture in sepia of the interior of an old train car my best friend gave me just before I left Ohio awkwardly stands out from the postcards and posters. Lisa's pictures hang on the wall across the room and consist mostly of friends and family and wildlife. I knew where I was going when I chose the fate of my summer, but now I'm not so sure. It's as though I've become disconnected and derailed from a path I don't think I was ever on. I close my eyes and try to meditate. *I wonder...I wander...I wonder...I wander...*

My eyes snap open at the sound of the door knob turning.

“Found one for ya.” Ryan stands at the foot of the bunk and holds up a book.

Before I can sit up, Ryan has climbed into the bunk with me and hands me the book. *Dharma Bums*. An overwhelming sensation sweeps over me. *Who is Ryan? Who was Ryan?* All I can do is lie back down and read. Ryan lies down opposite me and reads my book. We lie there yin yang style and read until we fall asleep.

Kerouac's spiritual wanderings resulted from his yearning to confront the Universal void. Unable to come to terms with the void, most people find ways to fill it, to give it meaning—career, family, religion. Kerouac was no different; he inevitably filled the void with alcohol. I have filled the void with Yellowstone, but Yellowstone is

vast and silent and and full of explosive energy.

Ryan is gone when I awake the next morning. We only see each other once more during the summer to exchange books again. *Purpose served*. Every time I add a Kerouac book to my collection I think of him.

\* \* \*

David and I don't choose well traveled trails. Yellowstone National Park receives about five million visitors every summer from Memorial Day through Labor Day. The land covers two million acres and 800 miles of hiking trails, yet most visitors cling to the villages, they cling to the roads.

Late July. We trek ten miles to the peak of Mt. Holmes—skip through a meadow, ford two rivers, and up up up. The tree line fades fast and the wind begins to whip against my cheeks. At the peak, we find the fire lookout ranger station anticipating our arrival. The ranger greets us with a big wave and immediately hands us his guest book to sign. Only thirty people have hiked Mt. Holmes this summer which he tells us is about average. His National Park Service uniform suddenly becomes pointless, his clean cut look odd. Lone mountain men don't wear uniforms, they don't shave everyday. We sink into the soft couch, out of the elements for the moment. The ranger makes us coffee and feeds us granola bars. He shows us all the fly rods he's made in the three months he's been there this season. That's what he does. He makes fly rods in the summer to sell in his shop in the winter. He has been doing it for eight years. He's got life figured out.

“Bet it gets lonely up here,” David says.

He gives David a crooked smile. “You get use to it.”

“Dharma Bums,” I say.

When Jack Kerouac worked as a fire lookout on Desolation Peak in the Cascades the summer of 1956, not a single person hiked to his lookout that summer.

The ranger smiles at me. On the shelf above the stove where the water boils for our coffee, I see a copy of *Dharma Bums* among his many books. I think of Ryan and the ripple effect that our meeting started that will spread out and beyond this summer.

It's late in the afternoon. We decide to head back down. The thick clouds have moved in closer. We pull out our raincoats and prepare. The hail hits before we make it below the tree line. Flashes of lightening and thunder claps follow. My heart races, but then I think that I would rather be struck dead by lightening than die in any sort of bleak, trite fashion. To die from a drug overdose or an accident, you become a statistic, but to be struck by lightening, you become a metaphysical phenomenon. We walk fast and make it back to my car before sunset.

We stop in West Yellowstone at the first pizza joint we see. The place crawls with tourists, but we are starving and decide to go in anyway. As the hostess walks us to our booth, families stop eating and glare at us from various tables we walk past. My matted hair sops with sweat and rain, my jeans are wet and muddy, and my running shoes squish with excess water. We just hiked twenty miles up and down a mountain. *Get out of your cars!* I want to yell at them. *Walk Somewhere!* Years later at a bar in Tahoe City, I meet a boy who turns me on to a book called *Desert Solitaire* by Edward Abbey. I never see the boy again, but I read the book over and over. *Get out of your cars. Walk Somewhere.*

\* \* \*

David leaves the Park for a week to travel north to Glacier, Montana with some friends visiting him from Michigan. Loneliness creeps in, but it's soon washed away with relief. I sit in the Old Faithful Inn up in the balcony and stare at all the contorted logs and sip on my Jameson. Hordes of tourists are still out at this hour looking for a piece of nature, a peace of mind. Kids too young to appreciate where they are run around in circles chasing each other. Adults too family focused to know what's really out there stand around and look at what's inside the Inn.

I stumble back to my room, that odd sinking sick sensation enveloping me. An unsettling anticipation that has come in waves since I've been here. At first, I attributed the feeling to my body adjusting to the high altitude, but I know that's not what it is. More like a building anxiety. It's already August. I leave in a month, and I have no idea what comes next.

\* \* \*

The next morning at breakfast, Randy, a gift shop co-worker, sits down across from me at my table and tells me to stop talking to myself. I've hardly spoken to Randy outside of our terrorizing tourists antics in the gift shop. In his big hazel eyes I see a spark of recognition. Nothing I can explain or will ever really be able to explain. *Who are you, Randy? Who were you? I know you.*

"Yeah, what do you know about it?" I ask and point my cereal spoon at him.

"We're working registers together today. I need to know the trivia question."

"Name all the Fraggles and they get a free postcard. That's always a fun one."

“Including Doc and Sprocket?” Randy stops eating and raises his eyebrows.

“That's the bonus part,” I say.

Randy smiles and finishes his breakfast with me before he leaves the employee dining room.

I know. *I will always know Randy.*

He leaves in two weeks, but unlike most people I've met here, Randy stays with me. Months later when I stop through Flagstaff to visit him on my way to a job in Big Sky, Montana, he takes me down to Sedona to climb on the red clay rocks so I can scream into the high desert sky. He also takes me to a old, desert psychic with dark ancient eyes and an unidentifiable accent. *You know each other*, she tells us.

\* \* \*

When David returns from Glacier, he only has two weeks left. We snag a back country permit and hike down to Heart Lake and up Mount Sheridan. Two days of pure hiking, pure thoughts.

“Are you ready for school to start?” I finally break the silence.

“Mmmmmmm I think I'm ready.”

He doesn't ask me anything. He already knows the answer. I don't probe him further. I don't care. The morning he leaves I will hug him, but I won't say goodbye. We've been saying goodbye to each other since we've met.

There's still snow at the peak of Mount Sheridan. I drop my rucksack and roll around in the untouched whiteness. I make snow angels. I look at David and throw a snowball at his blank face.

\* \* \*

Lisa stands in the doorway of our room—I can see her in my peripheral vision. Her arms crossed—brown shorts, hiking boots, scabbed knees, Lisa.

“So. Where you headed when your time's up?” I ask without looking at her. I slowly pull my clothes from the dresser and place them in my bag.

“Probably back to Portland, I suppose. Or maybe head down the coast to Newport to wait tables with my mom until winter. Then I'm heading back here. What about you? You're one of the few people who hasn't mentioned what you're doing.”

*Because I don't fucking know what I'm doing,* I want to scream at her.

“I applied to work at the ski resort in Big Sky this winter, but until then, I don't know.” I shrug. “Visit family and friends.”

“You get used to it after awhile.”

“Get use to what?” I ask and snap my head toward her.

“This lifestyle,” she says most matter of fact. Her red hair hangs just to her chin. It matches her scabbed knees.

\* \* \*

September. I pack my car. I sign some papers at the gift shop. Most everyone I worked with or lived around is gone. Now it's my turn. *Where am I? I am here. What next?*

I drive out the northeast entrance over the Beartooth Pass toward Red Lodge, Montana. At the peak of the pass, I stop to absorb the still, crisp night. I lean back onto the hood of my car and watch the sky. Two shooting stars fall one right after the other.

They shoot across the sky and arc downward before they disappear into the night void.

Once I reach Red Lodge, I check into a motel for the night.

The next morning I sit in front of a coffee shop and sip on my coffee and read through the notebook of notes I compiled over the summer before I hit I-90 and continue east. *Where am I? I am here. I am here. I am here.*



## Big Sky

*I don't go to school  
I don't go to churches  
I don't visit graveyards  
I don't know the purpose of 'em  
I'm living in between  
The earth and sky*

--Tea Leaf Green

Yellowstone National Park employees pack into the Two Bit Saloon to warm themselves from the cold night air. The juke box plays John Mellencamp much too loud, and Lisa dances wildly around the crowded barroom floor. It's the second week of December, and Gardner, Montana overflows with incoming park employees for the winter season. At the end of the week, they will all descend into Wyoming and scatter throughout the two villages open for the winter. This season I won't be joining them. I'm staying in Montana.

The first time I crossed over into Montana was on an early June afternoon. The sky expanded and sunk down into the Earth. The clouds became part of my immediate, accessible environment—no longer up there drifting above my head. Like all my memories, it's scribbled in a notebook. I had pulled my car over just outside of Livingston and inhaled Montana like some people inhale cigarettes. The thin air had me gasping for more. *You're not from here are you?* Said an old, gruff man who had just walked out of the general store. Did he ask because of my Ohio plates or because of my awe-struck stance, notebook in hand, camera swung over my shoulder. I lingered and took notes like I might be tested later—the long, straight stretch of black interstate surrounded by blue-gray mountain ranges still capped with snow. And like most people

who have ever been to Montana, I couldn't quite shake it from my system.

Lisa spots me and spastically waves. She weaves her way through the crowd of beanie heads, presses herself up to the bar, and plops down on the stool next to me almost knocking her arm into my cheap whiskey drink. She stares at me with tight lips and slitted eyes as though trying to decide if she recognizes me. I haven't seen her in three months. Her baby fine red hair hangs down to her shoulders now, but other than that she looks exactly the same. The freckles sprinkled across her nose scrunch up at me. She wants me to buy her a drink. I reach into my pocket and pull out all the money I have to my name. Three dollars. I slap it down in front of her.

“Happy twenty-first,” I say.

She just stares at the money with a blank expression.

“Sorry. It's all I've got. I haven't had a job for the past three months. I had to keep myself entertained.”

“No problem,” she says and glances up at the aging barkeep who now stands over us.

“Frank, this is Marty.” She puts her arm around my shoulder and pulls me close. “We were roomies over the summer in the park.”

Frank pours her a shot of tequila, and she slams it before I can even ask for a toast.

“So,” she says and turns toward me, “how does it feel to be back?”

How does it feel to be back. *How* does it feel to be back. How does it *feel* to be back. I haven't been back in the area long enough for such a question to be thrown at me.

Before I respond, a boy with a vaguely familiar face slides onto the other stool next to Lisa.

“Lisa, how the hell are you?” he says, his smile showing too many teeth, his eyes glaring much too hard.

“I’m good. Just got into Gardner yesterday.” She swings her head in my direction. “This was my roomie Marty from summer season. You remember her, right?”

“Yeah, yeah,” he says and wags his finger at me. “You worked with Lisa in the Snow Lodge Dining Room.”

“No.” I shake my head.

He snaps his fingers and points at me. “Lodge Cafeteria. You served me some bad ass tomato basil soup.”

“No.” I take the beanie off my head and lean in closer. “Lodge Gift Shop.”

“Oh,” he says and leans away from me. “I guess I don’t know you.” He slumps onto Lisa’s shoulder and whispers something into her ear.

I roll my eyes up and away from them, spin my stool around, and scan the now much too stuffy room. An unrecognizable country song blasts from the juke box. Two women dance around the pool table with their pool cues. They stray away from the table, grasping their sticks like they might a lover, and twirl madly. While Lisa yaps with the boy, I slip off my barstool, and I make my way out the door into the dry, cold mountain night. I have no idea if I will ever see Lisa again. I could tell myself I will, but really I don’t know. As each year slips by that I don’t see her or anyone I once knew, they begin to fade around the edges into fuzzy images of themselves—not quite real anymore, but

not quite ghosts.

How does it *feel* to be back. The bright stars reveal a faint trace of snow capping the dark silhouette of the mountains. I exhale hard into the moistureless air, but there is nothing. After living in and out of my car all autumn, driving up and down the clustered east coast and all about the flat fields of the mid-west, it feels damn good to be back in the vast mountains, it feels good to have a job again and a place to live for the winter. I pull my white knit beanie further down over my ears and skip down the block to my motel.

\* \* \*

Big Sky, Montana sits just off of Highway 191 and up a winding road two and a half hours north of West Yellowstone and an hour south of Bozeman. The first time I drove up the mountain I stopped to snag a postcard on the way up. The picture's taken from an aerial view of Lone Mountain which stands in the center covered with snow, ski runs etched down its front—the mountain village and the meadow village nudged snugly against the base. Mountains loom in all other directions with nothing to account for except miles and miles of peaks. When you examine the remoteness of Lone Mountain, it's a wonder how the area thrives, how it sucks in travelers like a black hole.

\* \* \*

I quietly open the door to my room in the Mountain Lodge. After my weekend excursion in Gardner, I'm ready to collapse for a long while. I feel my way over to my bunk and climb in bed. It feels good to be home in bed. *Home*—a funny word for a temporary environment, a concept that changes over time and places. A word that

becomes mutable like so many others I once thought of as concrete—friendship, memory, fear, lost, loneliness, family. To call this new place home is an odd sensation—new town, new people, new roommate, new job. A lonely ache rumbles in the pit of my stomach. How many times will I do this in my life?

I roll over onto my side. Jenn's arm hangs down over the bunk. My new *roomie*. She moved into the room the day before I left for Gardner. As I recall, she's in the same position she was in when I left—fully dressed lying on her stomach, arm dangling off the edge. I reach out to check her pulse, but I pull my hand back. Too creepy. I roll onto my back and stare at the bottom of her bunk.

“Goddamn it. What time is it?” A voice says above me.

“I don't know. Two maybe.”

“Two!” Jenn kicks her bed a couple time and struggles to sit up. “I'm late for work.”

“It's two in the morning. You're not late for work,” I say.

Without another word, her body falls back onto the bed and her arm drops back over the side.

The day Jenn moved into the room I had asked her why she chose Montana, why an obscure little ski town in the Northern Rockies?

“I like the mountains,” she told me as she climbed into her bunk to lie into the same position she lies in now. “I'm from Bogotá so I guess I'm use to mountains. I lived in Vermont last winter and now I'm in Montana.”

She didn't quite answer my question, but maybe she doesn't know really. Years

later when people ask me why I moved to this place or that, I have to think back on a chain of events. How I got from point A to point B that in most cases wasn't a fully conscious decision, but more of a thrust. I let outside forces decide my fate. What thrust her here? What thrust her out of the Andes and onto Lone Mountain?

\* \* \*

I trudge to work twice a week early in the morning before 8am—a ten minute trek through the packed snow-formed trail from the Mountain Lodge to the gift shop in the Huntley Lodge. The trail weaves through a cluster of pine trees, through the parking lot of a small hotel, over a large lump of snow, and past rows and rows of condos. An invigorating day hike, a danger trap after dark.

“Hey, Marrrr,” Amy says as she passes me on the trail, her voice hanging on the r sound. Her dark, crazed, hypnotic eyes lock with mine and our bodies turn to avoid breaking the gaze. We walk backward for a moment until the trail shifts, and just before we lose each other she throws me a peace sign. I swivel back toward my destination and continue down the trail, the r sound still ringing in my ears.

Amy lives next to Jenn and me. She and her roommate, Jackie, have a habit of inviting all of Mountain Lodge into their room every night of the week. They play Grateful Dead songs much too loud and dance until the entire Lodge vibrates. Some nights Jenn and I wander into the madness. Some nights we sit on the floor with ear plugs in our ears and box of wine between us and try to guess the songs by the vibration until we pass out. Some nights they rage until the sun comes up. Some nights I awake to Amy and her boyfriend, Jeff, arguing outside. They chase each other the length of the

deck and back shouting and sobbing. I plug my ears with my headphones and turn up my music until their undecipherable voices drown.

The people here aren't like the people I met over the summer in Yellowstone. No one here is in college. No one here has any plans. No one here has much of anything. They are all displaced ski bums on a permanent vacation from life. But the reality of it is, they aren't on any sort of vacation—this is their life. They have no former existence to return to when it stops being fun. A common factor between them and me that makes itself more apparent as the winter wears on.

\*\*\*

Hardly anyone wanders into my gift shop. It's in a hidden cove down one of the many hallways in the Huntley, full of over-priced sweaters and t-shirts and sunscreen. I spend my working hours cutting images and words out of magazines that no one ever buys. I collect images that reflect Big Sky, that reflect Montana, that reflect the people here, and I create a collage. Over the years, I come to see my season in Big Sky as that collage. The center being the beginning, so clear and memorable and then shooting out into a chaos of memories.

Ethan wanders into my shop as I chop the new *Montana Magazine* into a wild new version of my life. He leans over the horseshoe shaped counter and taps on the glass.

“Wanna go snowboarding tomorrow morning?”

“Sure,” I say and smile at him. Ethan lives on the other side of Jenn and me, and as far as we can figure, he likes to have wrestling matches with his roommate, Ricky,

between midnight and four in the morning.

The first time Ethan invited me to go snowboarding he offered me lessons on the easy runs. He and Ricky giggled maliciously at everything and everyone on the slope, even me when I took hard falls. After a few runs, it became apparent they were high on mushrooms. They used me as a scapegoat for snowboarding easy runs as well as for their shady behavior. At the end of the day, I wasn't sure who was more amused—me at them or them at me. The experience was a good system of learning to snowboard so I went with it.

“Great. I'll knock on your door at nine,” he says and gives my glass counter top another good hard tap. “Ricky and I wanna take you on some new runs so be prepared.”

“Prepared? In what way?”

He backs out of the door way and places his hands on his shaggy blond head.

“Listen, I've got a story to cover tomorrow night, an art show down in the meadow so I can't fool around. I've gotta get in some serious runs tomorrow.” He throws his arms out in a wave and slips out of my sight.

Ethan works as an intern journalist for the local mountain paper. Unlike most people here, he pretends to have a purpose.

\*\*\*

Jenn and Michael are smoking on the deck in front of our room when I get home from work. Michael wears only his flip flops and a towel around his waist, and his freshly chopped blond hair drips like he just got out of the shower. It's after dark on a Montana night in January, and he looks like he jumped out of the tropics onto our deck.



“Aren't you cold?” I ask him as I approach them.

“Nah,” he says and exhales the smoke from his cigarette. “I can't really feel anything right now.” His Alabama drawl pulls each word into eternity.

Michael lives in the room behind ours. He ingests obscure psychedelic research chemicals for fun and stays up for days on end playing his guitar until the strings begin to cut into the skin of his callouses. Preparing for the open-mic nights at the Black Bear he tells us; it's all he has to live for here. I give him a good look in the eyes before I go into the room. One eye is dilated much more than the other, and his vacant, sparkling stare chills me.

I plop down on my bed, and before I move again, Jenn shoves a Killian's in my hand.

“Michael and I are going out tonight. Lady's Night at Jack's. You should come. Can't go wrong with free drinks all night.” Jenn leans over the sink in our small dim living space and puts in her violet contact lenses. They give her eyes an eerie glow set against her dark skin and silky black hair.

“I think I'm going to skip out. Ethan and I are going snowboarding in the morning. He's taking me on some more challenging runs so I'd better be alert.”

Michael rolls his eyes up, shakes his head, and sighs. “Goddamn. You'd rather hang out with that asshole than dance with us. You're crazy. Me and Jenneeefer are going to be dancing to some Britney Spears. You can't miss out on that.”

Jenn slowly applies mascara and giggles. “Yeah right. In your dreams Michael. I am not going to go out dancing to Britney Spears.”

Michael reaches in his pocket and pulls out a tiny wad of toilet paper and holds it out toward Jenn. "Here, take this. You'll change your mind real fast about that."

Jenn picks up the paper and rolls it around between her fingers. "What's this?"

"A.M.T."

"What?"

"Alpha-methyltryptamine."

Jenn and I crack up at Michael's odd yet natural way of spouting chemistry jargon.

"Michael, I don't understand what you're telling me," Jenn says.

"Trust me. Just eat it and you will have so much fun." Michael bobs his head back and forth, his eyes growing wider and wider.

Jenn sticks her tongue out and licks the paper gently.

"You can't be serious," I finally say and join Jenn by the sink to study the ball of paper. "You aren't really going to take it are you?"

"What will it do to me?" Jenn squints her eyes at Michael.

"It'll make you dance, man," he says and bounces around the room in wild gesticulations.

"Great. I haven't felt like dancing in years." Jenn puts the paper on her tongue and the strange substance disappears.

"Here." Michael reaches in his pocket and pulls out another tiny paper wad.

"That's ok," I say and fall back onto my bed. "I'm not into dancing."

"You will be if you take this," he says and holds the paper over my mouth.

"Come on, just take it." He picks up a Hunter Thompson book from one of the shelves

opposite our bunk and waves it at me. "I bet this dude would eat it."

"I bet he would," I say and bury my face into my pillow until they leave.

Of all the people working here this winter, why are Jenn and Michael the ones most prominent in my life? Maybe I'm supposed to help them somehow. Or maybe they're supposed to help me. Before I moved to Big Sky, sometime around the end of September, my car quit running just outside of a tiny fishing village in Northern Ohio. As I snuggled under the blankets in the guest room of a kindly mechanic, I decided that people have a need for other people no matter their temporary presence in each other's lives. I needed a fixed car, and the mechanic needed work to occupy his mind in the midst of a bad tornado season. Maybe Michael and Jenn and I need each other the way that the mechanic and I did.

\*\*\*

A thud, the door slams. I don't know how long I've been asleep.

Jenn paces across the floor and mumbles to herself. "Nice and pink. Everything is nice and pink."

"What's going on? Jenn, turn on the light," I say and flop myself into a sitting position.

Michael flips the light switch and plops onto the floor—his legs crossed, his face a mix of concern and amusement. "I think she's freakin' out, man," he says and runs his fingers through his hair.

"Nice and pink," Jenn says a bit louder and steps over Michael's knee as she crosses the room again.

"I don't know what happened. First she puked about half way to Jack's which is a pretty normal reaction to this stuff."

"Great," I say, "at least something's normal."

"We were dancing and dancing and having a great time then the music changes and she just stops dancing. Then she ran outside and won't stop saying *nice and pink*."

"It'll wear off pretty soon, right?" I say.

"It lasts a good 18 hours, but I think she took quite a bit. I always forget other people don't have the tolerance I do."

"Is she going to be alright?"

"I've seen some people really go off the deep end, but no one's ever died if that's what you mean."

Jenn stops pacing and lifts her arms into the air. "Listen, guys. Just stop talking, ok?" She climbs into her bed and shifts around for a moment.

An awkward stillness fills the room. The dim light hums loud. Feet clunk on the deck outside.

"Jeff, leave me the fuck alone. Go home," Amy shouts from somewhere on the deck and a door slams.

Did she mean for him to go home back to his room above ours or go home back to Pennsylvania? Where do Amy and Jeff consider home? Where do Jenn and Michael consider home? Would they live the same life that they live here elsewhere? How much does place play in how you react to your surroundings? Would Amy and Jeff still be drawn to each other outside of Big Sky? Would Michael and Jenn and I still be friends if

we had met in another time and place? Would we need each other for the same purpose? The questions never stop, but my need to know and understand the answers subsides over time.

An unrecognizable voice shouts from further away, "I have no love for the Mountain Lodge."

Two thuds vibrate the common wall between our room and Ethan and Ricky's room. A few of the postcards that hang on the wall fall down past my bed and onto the floor.

\*\*\*

Ethan and Ricky take me snowboarding at nine sharp and leave me for dead near the peak of Lone Mountain. We jump off the lift, I check my footing, and when I'm ready, they've already taken off. I slide down a black diamond on my ass, snowboard still strapped to my feet, mounds of snow and hard, cold patches of ice as far as I can see.

"Marty," someone from the lift above my head shouts.

I lean back in the snow and wave. Everyone looks the same to me dressed in proper ski gear though I stand out considerably in my black nylon pants, green wool coat, and white hat. I normally don't like to stand out, but when it might save my life, I don't mind too much.

Each scoot I make, my dislike for Ethan mounts. Why does he even bother asking me to hang out with him? Every outing ends the same. He hangs his head and his hair flops forward and he sighs as though he wonders the same thing. But we always hesitantly make plans to hang out again and again. I hardly know Ethan, but I understand

his dilemma. He's not new to this gig and neither am I. We both know how it ends.

\*\*\*

Mid-February. It's the coldest night of the season and I can't find any of the hotel bell-boys to drive me back to my room after my shift. I hit the death-trap trail and my legs go completely numb in a matter of minutes. If I fall, I'm a goner. The rumor of the day was a negative twenty-five during the night. Jesus. The air is so cold it hurts to breathe, and without the moon, only the few stars peaking out between the moving clouds guide my way down the twisted, snow packed path.

By the time I get back to the Mountain Lodge, every part of my body hurts. I slam my hand on the door unable to bring myself to touch the metal doorknob.

"I'm locked in," Jenn shouts.

I press my forehead against the door. "What do you mean?"

"The door is frozen shut. I'm stuck."

"Oh God, ok, listen. I'll press and you pull. Got it?"

"Got it."

I push the back of my body hard against the solid wooden door. My feet slip on the frozen ground below me, and I slide down the door until my ass smacks the ground.

"It's not working," Jenn says.

"No shit," I say and knock my head back against the door.

"I'll try turning the heater way up and use my blow dryer. Go to the Black Bear and get us some vodka."

I clumsily slide over to the deck railing and pull myself up. The Black Bear Bar

and Grill sits adjacent to the Mountain Lodge which makes every night a wild night when all the resort employees can just stumble a few feet home. But tonight, it sits deserted save for the few patrons scattered down the bar, wrapped in heavy coats, beer bottles at their lips. Something about the ultra cold nights—we all seek out our securities.

When I press our room door again, it opens slightly and knocks against a chair. Jenn moves the chair to let me inside.

“Now it won't stay shut. I got the knob to turn, but the latch won't come back out.” She grabs the vodka bottle from me and takes a few big chugs.

Michael shows up soon after, his eyes dilated, his head bobbing, one hand gripping his guitar, the other a box of pink wine.

Years later when I remind Jenn about the incident, she only shakes her head and says that she doesn't remember and therefore it never happened. I should have taken a picture, but I only wrote it down.

\*\*\*

Early March. Ethan and I sneak into the hot pool at the Summit Hotel. As employees, we're supposed to stay away from the guests' space, but if you're clever, you can get away with anything. We lie in the steaming water and watch the snow fall all around us, but never hit us.

I inhale a deep breath and finally ask. “What are your plans when the season's over?”

He takes an equally deep breath and sighs. “Too early to think about still. Usually I have it figured out by the last two weeks. Maybe I'll stick around here or move

to Bozeman. I don't know yet really.”

He doesn't return the question because people here don't want to know. The less people here know about where you came from or where you're going all the better. No one wants to get attached. The snow magnifies the quietness. I close my eyes, slip under the water and glide to the other end of the pool.

*Attachment.* It's hard to invest in a friendship you don't know will survive beyond the season. Whether friendships made on the road will last is like throwing dice. It's completely random. There's no guessing or even choosing who or why. Some of them I still write and talk with on occasion. Most of them I don't.

Years later at an outdoor lounge in San Pedro, Guatemala, I meet a girl who sheds her life every two years. Nothing remains from her former lives—no people, no places, nothing. *I'm a lot like Sabina*, she tells me and gives me her old copy of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. Like Sabina, she frees herself from the burden of attachment and floats through life light like a balloon above the earth, only half existing in reality. Her life reminds me of most people I knew in Big Sky, but some do get attached. And when they do, they fall to earth hard.

\*\*\*

Michael and Jeff disappear mid-March. We didn't see it coming. Jeff and Amy had gotten into the biggest fight yet. Someone got bruised, but I didn't ask who. They left while Jenn and I were at work. No trace of where they might have gone. No goodbye notes. No stray t-shirts or drugs or guitar strings. Nothing resonated with their existence in Big Sky except for the fleeting energy that gives way to emptiness.



“Do you think we ought to check on Amy? She was pretty distraught last night,” Jenn says and climbs down out of her bunk. “Jackie was supposed to watch after her, but I heard some strange banging sounds not too long ago.”

We step outside and knock on Amy's slightly ajar door. No sound. Jenn swings the door open. Amy slumps up against her bed, her face pale and pasty, her dark eyes sunk back.

“Amy, are you alright? Where's Jackie?” Jenn says and pokes at her arm.

Amy shrugs her shoulders, bursts into uncontrollable sobs, and drops an empty bottle of pain pills.

“Did you take all these?” I say and pick up the empty bottle.

She nods slow and slumps down further.

“We should to take her to the clinic,” Jenn says and motions for me to grab her other arm.

We help Amy stand and walk her out of her room and into the crisp, fresh air. Amy and Jeff had only met months before. How did they become so attached to do this to each other in so short a time? This is what attachment does. This is why no one gets close. This is why no one asks too many questions.

\*\*\*

Our room feels empty of life since Michael left, since Jeff and Amy's voices don't ring through the room anymore. Nothing fills the void. The day we took Amy to the clinic I stopped hanging out with Ethan. He got busy with the newspaper, and I don't push to see him.

"I miss Michael," Jenn says when we go to the first open-mic night at the Black Bear since Michael left. "Every night I think he's going to walk into the room with a box of wine like always." She grasps my arm tight. "Don't disappear like he did."

"I'm right here," I say. Eventually the season will end, but I don't bring it up.

A couple months later when I drop Jenn off in Florida to catch her flight back to Colombia she hugs me tight. "You better write to me," she says.

I do write to her. But writing doesn't replace that lingering feeling of a missing part of my existence. She was always there and then she was gone. Just like Michael.

I don't know what most people are doing when they leave here. No one talks about it. They hug and toast to all the friends they made, but when the time comes, they all pack up and leave and move on to the next chapter—light with no burden of attachment.

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Jenn shoves my wine-filled Nalgene bottle into my hands. Two weeks before the season is over, we hike down to Ousel Falls one early afternoon in early April when the sun is directly overhead, reflecting against the snow, white washing everything—when the temperature is pushing forty and we are shedding our clothes. The red wine in our Nalgene bottles helps to facilitate the warming process. The switchbacks that lead down to the falls are covered in at least two feet of snow. We slide down an avalanche shoot to the bottom of the frozen falls—solid water suspended in motion. A snapshot. A postcard. A piece of a collage. My life on a mountain in south central Montana. *My life. I am here.* Echoes shotgun out between the crevasses. The white nothingness sprawls. I

lie face up to the sky, mouth agape, pure mountain snowflakes evaporate before they hit  
my tongue.

When the Sky Sparkles

*How could you know that I lived in a desperate world?  
How could you dream that we were all made out of stone?  
What is the truth, what is the faithful lasting proof?  
What is the central theme to this everlasting spoof?*

—Phish

Michael and I stand on Kitty's doorstep dirty, hungry, and homeless like stray cats. Sweat drips down our faces. The San Fernando Valley summer sun heats our skin. A numbing depression seeps into my body from the ground up. I wiggle my toes in attempt to feel some sort of delight in being alive, but I only notice the wear and tear and grime on the flip-flops under my feet, my wide-legged khaki pants and yellow sunburst top stained from weeks of constant wear. I clip my hair in a sloppy bun on the back of my head to cool my neck, to feel anything but hot, hungry, and exhausted.

Between Key West and Los Angeles, Michael and I had each shed several pounds—on a diet of psychedelic white powder, fresh fruits, and raw vegetables. Half way between hallucinations and delirium, the desert oozed death. Bones and giant bodies scattered over the dry, rocky terrain of the Mojave. The signs for alien jerky near Baker weren't as funny as they should have been. We couldn't get to the coast fast enough.

“Not feeling so well,” I say and sit on Kitty's front stoop. Hot, still silence. “I don't think she's home.”

Michael turns the doorknob and presses slightly.

“Whadda ya know,” he says and steps inside the small house. “She must be sober. She kept three locks on the place she had before. Kept them locked even when she was home. Jumped every time anyone knocked.”

The generically decorated house screams that she wants to live in comfort, but just doesn't know how. A beige couch sets against a white wall where three small pictures of flower arrangements hang—the frame size printed on the edge of the paper pictures. Michael and I collapse onto the not so soft couch cushions.

\*\*\*

A door slams and my eyes snap open. Kitty's ice blue eyes glare down on us, her feathery blond hair catches in her eyelashes. She wears white pants and a red halter top that matches her lips.

“No drugs. No drugs in my house Michael. You hear me. No drugs.” Her voice loud, gruff, and powerful.

Michael brushes the hair out of his eyes. “I know,” he says, his southern accent drawing out the I.

Kitty steps back and sits in a matching beige chair across the room. Probably equally uncomfortable. She lights a cigarette and takes a long drag. Her icy eyes don't leave us.

“So, who's the chick?” she finally says and nods her head toward me.

“Marty,” I say and wave.

“We met on a mountain in Montana,” Michael adds. “And then we met up again in Florida, and now we're here on your couch.”

“Right,” she says breathlessly, takes another drag from her cigarette, and puts it out in an ashtray on the arm of her chair. “I need to get going. I've got an interview at a toy store before my N.A. meeting tonight.”

“Toy store,” Michael says and giggles.

“Yeah,” she sighs. “Whips, cuffs, swings, creams...,” she gets up and grabs her purse. “Dolls, movies, illustration books...,” her muffled voice still listing when she shuts the door behind her.

Kitty is an ex-crack-whore-porn star. *Nothing you've probably ever seen,* Michael had told me speeding down the deserted Interstate, *unless you're into that.*

\*\*\*

Before I met Michael, when he first left Alabama and headed to L.A., he lived with Kitty. He had called one of those girls you find in free sex ad magazines just to see what would happen. He called Kitty's ad. He thought she looked fun all made up in leather holding a whip. She had just left her husband and Michael needed a place to live so they moved in together a week later. When Kitty wandered away from their apartment one night strung out on heroin and didn't come back for three weeks, Michael hitchhiked out of L.A. He caught a ride with a Southern California girl looking for an endless winter. They drove to Montana.

\*\*\*

Kitty finds us lying face up, our bodies stretched out over her living room floor when she comes home from her meeting. She yanks us up by the arms and tosses us out until we can act normal. We aren't high, but the residual effects of experimental psychotropic drugs can linger for days, weeks, years. We drive all over West Hollywood looking for something to eat, something that will sustain us, something that our bodies won't reject. I write in my notebook under the heading *lesson* that when dabbling in

strange chemical substances that alter your brain's chemistry, you really learn to listen to your body—what your body craves, what it won't accept. Or maybe I was just listening to the drugs—what is it that *they* wanted. It's all perspective—what angle am I going to look from today?

We stumble onto the only Thai restaurant in Hollywood with an Elvis impersonator. This I'm sure of. Michael and I pick at our noodle dish and listen to the balding man next to us heckle the Elvis.

“You are a goddamn genius,” the man shouts and throws his arm into the air nearly jumping out of his seat. “Listen to this guy, just listen.”

The Elvis gives a grim smile to the little man and asks for requests.

“Fools Rush In,” Michael says low, under his breath.

When the first chords of the song emerge from the speakers, I lean over the table toward Michael. “How did he hear you?”

Michael shrugs his shoulders and continues watching the Elvis out the corner of his eye. “Because I wanted him to.”

\*\*\*

Less than a week after we arrive, we pack up and leave Kitty's place during the night and head northbound on Highway 101.

“Let's hop on tour,” Michael says.

“Brilliant,” I say, my eyes closed, my head half out the passenger window, the chilly night air whipping at my face. Every idea Michael has is brilliant.

“We could sell,” Michael says and he points to the glove box.

In the glove box are drugs that could send you to other dimensions—not ordinary street drugs, but research chemicals. AMT, 2-CP, 2-CT-7, 2-CI—the combinations of letters and numbers as endless as winding highways.

“I don't know,” I say and pull my head back into the car.

“We could always pass it off as LSD. These kids won't know the difference.”

“You wouldn't do that,” I say and give Michael a weak knock with my left fist.

“Nah, I guess I wouldn't.”

Psychedelics lay your soul bare. Hard to hide behind, they tend to make you honest not only to others, but to yourself. That's why people have bad trips, that's why a lot of people shy away from them. I'd always heard that psychedelics weren't addictive, but that's not completely true. It's the psychological dependence on them that people tend to forget about. What's difficult is finding an addict, finding anyone who can maintain in that condition for weeks on end and still have his wits about him to keep on, keep on. Michael's that type of addict which I find absolutely fascinating. Maybe that's why I agreed to travel back west with him. Or maybe I had nothing better to do with my life.

\*\*\*

When I'm with Michael, life becomes surreal and illuminated. And as sobriety sneaks up on us, everything slowly fades to darkness and becomes hard to see. But then we dose again and lightness enters, veils are lifted and the world begins to sparkle as the illusions of reality fall away.

Weeks earlier when I first met up with Michael in Florida and he dosed me, I lost grip of reality and watched it roll back into the ocean. *Where are we?* I had asked.



*Jupiter*, he said.

\*\*\*

Salt Lake City. A van load of kids hands out copies of *Go Ask Alice* in the lot before the show. I read the small book in less than an hour then I promptly set it on fire. The flames eat the book. Fuel for the fire to keep living until there is nothing left except for the ashes that lift in the wind and disappear.

A boy with wire-rimmed glasses and curly black hair applauds me.

“That was beautiful,” he says. “I’m Timmy.”

I shake his hand, and in my palm, I find a small piece of paper with an address on it.

“If you’re ever in San Fransisco, give me a ring.”

\*\*\*

Michael and I listen to music non-stop while we travel. We bob our heads and dance as much as one possibly can strapped in a car doing seventy miles per hour. I enjoy the progressive rock, the classic rock. Michael has a penchant for Britney Spears. He shows me the pictures on the liner notes—Britney twirling, leaving a colorful trail of herself behind her.

“I drove all the way to Miami to see her once.”

“How’d that go?” I ask, curious how a bunch of teenyboppers would respond to the presence of Michael, twice their age, with shaggy hair, and a tie-dyed Phish t-shirt.

“It was too much, man,” he says and shakes his head.

“The show?”

“Nah, the hotel room. I overdosed. I drove all the way back to Alabama before the show even started.”

“That's compulsive,” I say, relieved. The thought of Michael dancing at the show, flailing his arms, pupils dilated leaves me feeling a little uneasy. An image of horrified parents pulling their innocent pre-teen children close to them enters my mind.

\*\*\*

Driving Highway 70 through Plumas National Forest, the world around me begins to morph again. The highway winds through a deep canyon next to a raging river—massive stones and bright green trees line the canyon walls.

“I feel like I'm inside of a Super Mario Brothers game,” Michael says, his hands grip the steering wheel.

“I don't see it,” I say. “The stones are all rock-biters from the Neverending Story.”

He giggles then we laugh hysterically, singed by a fear that this is what the world is under the layers of illusion.

\*\*\*

Mountain View, California. Darkness encompasses the deserted camping grounds. Tents surround the area, but everyone is off watching the band. We sit in my car and listen. We let the music come to us.

“How long do the mushrooms last?” I ask. A tingling sensation cruises through my body.

Michael doesn't answer me. He sits next to me and stares wide-eyed at a box of

cereal.

“Michael,” I say.

He looks at me, his face concerned.

“Michael,” I say again. Nervousness replaces the tingles and I want to be sober now. I've never seen Michael in a situation where he can't communicate with me. No matter where he goes on his trips he usually leaves one foot loosely near reality. But not this time. He's gone.

Michael rips apart the cereal box and the cornflakes spew.

“Let's get out,” I say.

I shut my car door and the alarm sounds. I frantically reach for my keys, but they aren't in my pocket, they aren't in the ignition, they aren't in my car seat. Michael stares at the car, his eyebrows raised in wonderment.

“Michael, do you have my car keys?” I enunciate each word loudly.

No response.

I scurry around the car and run my hands over the dirt ground that I cannot see. I can't believe this is happening. I *cannot* believe this is happening. I want to wake up from this nightmare right now.

“I think they might be in the trunk,” Michael finally says.

I stop. “Were we in the trunk for anything?”

“Maybe.”

I know that I haven't opened the trunk since we've been here, but I panic anyway and kick my trunk hard as though it might pop open. Michael is supposed to be the one

in control. He's the expert. The alarm seems to be louder, groups of people walk by us and stare, but don't ask questions. I open the back passenger door and find my keys sitting on top of my bag. I don't remember how they got there. I grasp them to my chest and hold them tight. Years later, the situation becomes so surreal in my mind—the timing of events so out of order, the ringing of my car alarm so distant. Like most memories I don't record in my notebook, I can't quite remember if it really happened.

\*\*\*

We get lost in Mendocino National Forest and end up on an unpaved road in the night. We aren't the only ones. A car passes us and rolls down the window. A lone man with dreary eyes and creases around his mouth leans toward us.

“You guys know the way back to the highway?”

Michael blinks at the man then blinks at me for an answer.

I shrug.

“Where you guys coming from?” the man asks and leans back into his car a bit.

“California,” Michael says.

The man rolls his window up and zooms away.

Michael leans the passenger seat back and tucks a pillow under his head. “What's the weirdest thing that's ever happened to you?” he asks.

“Damn, I don't know,” I say and shrug. “Being on this road is pretty weird.”

“I bet that guy's thinking the exact same thing,” Michael says.

\*\*\*

I don't know what time of day it is when we pull into San Francisco. Thick, low

clouds cover the sky. I ring Timmy's doorbell and hope that he gave me a legitimate address. When he answers the door, the tension disappears and exhaustion weighs on my body. I could sleep for days, but Michael breaks out the 2-CP so I go with it. I lean against the front door and swallow the tiny wad of tissue paper. Michael and Timmy tune guitars, and I make my way around the edges of the room and study the bookshelves that line the walls. I pull out a square shaped book with a picture of a chair on the cover, points of light shoot out from the center of the chair and envelop it with intricate lines. The phrase *Be Here Now* circles the points of light. The word *Remember* lines the four edges of the book.

“But what am I supposed to remember?” I say and drop the book.

Everything in my peripheral vision shimmers. My eyes dart around the room until my vision fades into bright sparkles. Too many stars fill the room, and I can't see beyond their brightness. My body tightens and the top of my head burns. I'm fully convinced Michael and Timmy are controlling everything happening to me. My skin constricts and I can't bend my fingers. Timmy and Michael only stare at me, expressionless, unmoving.

“Make it stop!” I yell at them and stomp my feet on the hardwood floor like a child throwing a tantrum.

I fall to the ground hard and scream and scream and scream. I don't know how much time passes before the screaming stops and the brightness subsides and my body relaxes into a pleasant numbness. Without a word Michael and Timmy reach for my hands and help me stand. We leave the apartment and wander the city streets for the rest

of the night. We take pictures of streetlights and signs and people. In Kerouac Alley, I stand on the edge of a Steinbeck quote and take pictures—*the free exploring mind of the individual human is the most valuable thing in the world.*

For the next three weeks, I'm convinced I can read everyone's mind. I'm convinced I can see the stars sparkle through the thick fog over the city. And once the effects wear off, I want to do it all over again.

\*\*\*

Michael and I stay in San Francisco with Timmy. He doesn't give us a cue to leave so we don't. I write in my notebook that my life is like a falling star—riding fire through the sky until it comes crashing down through the atmosphere, burnt, spent, rock. I have nowhere to go until I catch a ride on the next falling star, but it's hard to see stars in the city. Each falling star is a comet at first—a never ending ride through space and time—and then it's over. The urgency to move on becomes a way of life that's hard to see in the moment. *When do I stop? Why should I? Be here now.*

Early one morning just as the sun broke through the clouds, Timmy pulls his copy of *On the Road* from one of his bookshelves. He opens to a passage and does a dramatic reading.

“I like too many things and get all confused and hung up running from one falling star to another till I drop. This is the night, what it does to you. I had nothing to offer anyone except my own confusion.” He shuts the book and bows his head. “We live in perpetual darkness. Lucky for Gaia, she found a star to guide her way and round and round she goes,” he says and points out the window to the sun.

I know Timmy took more of the drug—I can see it in his dilated pupils and flushed skin. And I am convinced he can see into me and through me and I want to hate him for that.

\*\*\*

Near the end of my five month stay in San Francisco we go to a costume party in an old warehouse. I leave Michael and Timmy on the much too crowded dance floor and run upstairs to the balcony to breathe. I sink back into the small, musty room away from the overlooking edge and slide down the wall until I hit the floor. The nylon fairy wings strapped to my back catch and rip on the ridged wall. A band plays in the distance, loud chaos circles in front of me. A man dressed like a pirate runs up the stairs, heads straight for an empty chair, and kicks it. The horror of the scene astounds me—this world of layered illusions I'm living in and the fierce laughter that echoes as he kicks the chair again and again and again.

## Under the New Moon

*And so they linked their hands and danced  
Round in circles and in rows  
And so the journey of the night descends  
When all the shades are gone*  
--Loreena McKinnett

When I get to Flagstaff I head straight for Randy's apartment. I knock and peep through his window. He's not at home, but the door is unlocked so I go inside anyway. Empty boxes of all sizes lay scattered around the living room and kitchen. In the center of the coffee table sits a stack of *Weekly World News* magazines. White noise from the TV echoes through the apartment. Randy's posters of Yellowstone and Arches National Parks still hang on the walls, his coffee pot is still in place. But something is not right.

"Randy," I say, unsure. I tug on the ends of my braids and spin in a slow circle.

The bathroom door swings open and a cloud of steam rolls out and a boy I've never seen before follows it, a towel around his waist, his hair dripping wet.

I scream, then he screams, and we both stand in the middle of the living room screaming at each other as if it might make the other disappear. The whiteness of his skin and the shrill in his voice don't seem real to me. I might be hallucinating him. These days I can't be sure so I lift my leg and kick his shin as hard as I can.

\*\*\*

I wrap a wet cloth around Drew's shin and place a bag of ice over the cloth. He flinches and pushes the back of his head into the recliner.

"Randy's in Moab," he says and covers his eyes with his arm. "Family reunion or something. He left a couple days ago. He'll be back in two weeks. He wasn't expecting



you was he?"

"No. I was headed up to Lake Tahoe for a job until my car overheated in Winslow. No one can even look at it until Monday so I hitched a ride here."

"Fine. You can stay in Randy's room. I'm going to be out of town the next couple days." Drew lifts his head and glares at me. "If I can walk, that is."

I don't know what to say. How can I possibly convince him that I thought he might have not been real without sounding like a nut case?

\*\*\*

Drew sits at his desk and types diligently. Copies of the *Weekly World News* sit on his desk, a few of the articles are stuck on the wall in front of him. A naked Ken doll hangs by his neck from the ceiling fan string. Should I take him up on his offer to stay in Randy's room? Or make a quick escape? I should stay to help—I'm probably obligated. But something about this guy gives me the creeps, and the urge to run, run, run won't leave my system.

"Could you hand me that notebook on my bed?" he twists around in his chair to ask.

"What are you working on?" I ask and give him the notebook.

"Paper for my journalism class. The squirrel conspiracy," he says and turns his attention back to typing.

"Squirrel conspiracy?" I say and immediately regret it.

"Yeah, have you ever watched squirrels? I mean, really watched them. The way they stare at you with those black beady eyes when you're not paying attention." He

stops typing again and looks at me. “They’re collecting data.”

“Data?”

“And the way they snatch acorns. It’s just uncanny. Like how aliens snatch humans.” He twists back around to his computer and types with such urgency it frightens me.

“Hey, I’m gonna go find something to do,” I say and step out of the room.

He stops typing again. “Oh, if you could be back by five that would awesome. I’ve been dying to cook dinner for someone since I’ve moved in. And Randy’s never here.”

“Right,” I say and wave goodbye.

I’ve gotten better at accepting the challenges life throws at me, but this is ridiculous. Maybe I have something to learn from Drew. Maybe he has something to learn from me. Maybe I should give him a chance and see where it takes me from here.

\*\*\*

The first time I stopped through Flagstaff to visit Randy he was still living in the dorms. I got to the campus and had no idea where to go from there. I had written down in my notebook that the scenario of my situation summed up my life—*I know where I am but where do I go from here?* The soft turquoise glow of the San Francisco Peaks loomed in the distance—supposedly dormant volcanoes, but how could you ever really know? Why is it that the most desirable places to live or visit are also the most dangerous—areas on the coasts, on volcanoes, near fault lines? Maybe it’s the energy of the ever imminent chance that disaster could hit at any moment. Maybe no one thinks

about it or even cares. Maybe I have no business asking such questions.

\*\*\*

Drew limps around the kitchen preparing dinner. I set plates and forks on the small table positioned to separate the living room from the kitchen.

"You know, I'm thinking about staying at the hostel in town. I don't want to be a nuisance to you," I say.

He stops chopping the tomatoes and turns to face me, knife clenched in his hand like it might fly away if he let go. "Oh. I was hoping you'd stick around for the weekend. My leg is still pretty sore. It might be too soon to drive." He swivels back around and continues chopping tomato chunks. "I thought it would be pretty fun to get to know one of Randy's friends on a Sedona excursion."

"Sedona excursion," I say. The longer I stay the more helpless I feel.

"Yeah, a group of my friends from all over the state get together every weekend to camp. I had to miss last weekend so I was really hoping to get down there," he says and limps over to me stiff legged and plops into a chair at the table.

"Do you have any whiskey?" I ask.

"No. I'm not much of a drinker, none of us are." He leans down and rubs his shin. "I think you've really done some damage. Are you a trained fighter?"

Who the hell is this guy? Who *was* this guy? I give him a good hard look in the eyes to search for any lingering recognition from a past life perhaps. But nothing is there. His vacant sky blue stare passes through me and sends chills over my arms.

\*\*\*

We drive just past Sedona to the campsite. A faint pink glow expands from where the red rocky terrain meets the deep blue sky. A dozen or so people of all ages shuffle around the clay grounds, set up tents, and pile wood into a fire pit. A tall tepee hovers above the tents. And a small flag with a black phoenix on it waves above the tepee. I park Drew's car and step out into the cool, dry October evening. I pull the hood of my sweatshirt over my head and breathe the clean thin air.

I follow Drew the gimp over to the tepee. A man with thin hair and small wire rimmed glasses stands over a camping stove and a pot of boiling water. He looks at us over the rim of his glasses and gives Drew a crooked smile.

"This is Marty. She's going to join us in ceremony this weekend," Drew says and nods his head toward the man in what appears to be some sort of bow.

"Welcome. I'm RJ," he says and extends his arm to shake my hand.

His hand is warm and calloused, his grip tight, his eyes dark and alive like snakes moving around inside of them—not at all like Drew's eyes, not at all like any eyes I've seen before. I yank my hand back a bit too quick and all three of us jump. RJ laughs and winks at me like we share some secret. An odd nervousness creeps over my body. Does he *know* me?

\*\*\*

The sun lowers in the sky creating an orange glow over the red land. I help set up the tents while Drew sits on the hard clay ground and a young Reiki master with short curly hair and bangles up her arms heals his leg.

"What ceremony?" I ask Drew.

“This thing we do in the evening after the sun goes down,” he says, his eyes not leaving the young girl's colorful arms.

The sun sinks deeper behind the red ridges and darkness eclipses into night.

\*\*\*

The group gathers and sits on rocks and stumps around the fire, silent. Sparks fly up from the fire pit and pop in the air. No one chats. No one takes their eyes from the glow of the flames.

“Welcome,” RJ says and emerges from his tepee wearing a white cloak around his shoulders. He holds a large ceramic bowl and walks slow and steady toward the group. He sits, closes his eyes, and begins to chant.

“Om shanti, om shanti...,” he continues to chant and the group joins him.

He gulps from the bowl and passes it to his left. When the bowl reaches me, I only stare at it. I want to ask Drew what the hell is going on, but the group is staring at me, waiting. I sip the dark liquid and lick my lips. I cringe at the bitter taste. I spent a good chunk of my summer experimenting with what strange drugs would do to my body and mind. The thought of coming detached from reality, the thought of going back to that place in my mind where nothing is what it seems suddenly overwhelms me. I gulp from the bowl and pass it left. My stomach tightens and tightens and tightens. When the bowl reaches RJ, the chanting stops. He stands and faces the boy to his right. The boy holds his arms out to his sides and RJ runs his fingers down the boy's face leaving black marks at random. A motion that enchants me more and more the longer I sit and watch. And when he reaches me, I close my eyes. His hand moves like silk down my face,

nothing at all like when I shook it earlier.

RJ claps his hands to signal the start of the next activity. We spin in circles and dance. I spin until I can't take it anymore. I run from the group, collapse onto the ground, and clench my stomach. When I roll over and open my eyes, Drew is standing over me.

"Are you ok?" he asks.

"No. What the hell did we drink? It's not agreeing with me at all," I say and stare at him. He's almost transparent now, his eyes not there at all.

"Ayahausca," he says.

*Who are you Drew? Who are you? Who were you?*

\*\*\*

I awake in the same spot where I collapsed to the blazing desert sun on my face. I dust myself off, wipe the ash from my face, and hobble back to the camp. The tents still stand, but everyone is gone including Drew. Thank God. The crispness of my vision stuns me. Each tent releases a soft glow that pulses gently in and out. No drug I took over the summer made my sight so clear or the world so alive. I head straight for RJ's tepee. The simplicity of the inside surprises me—just a cot and a small table filled with books on shamanism and South American tribes. Each item in RJ's tepee has a different kind of pulse—some items pulse rapidly, some pulse with a slow wavering. I pick up one of his books and open it. A small hand gun rests in the center of the freshly cut pages. The glow around it pulses rhythmically like a heart. I snap the book shut, wipe where I touched it with my sweatshirt, and flee.

Year later, I wonder why the gun was not as a clue to get the hell out of Sedona, but at the time, it only felt like the natural extension of that time and place, an extension of the curious pulse that encompassed everything.

\*\*\*

“Claudia can read your eyes and see into your soul,” she says and cups her hands over mine. Her face appears youthful, but her gray eyes hold ancient wisdom.

“I’m just doing research,” I say and gently pull my hands back.

Claudia’s bookstore was only one of the many New Age shops in Sedona, but hers had the brightest glow and the widest pulse.

“Ayahausca is very powerful,” she says and watches my fingers move over all the books she has on the subject.

“I’m writing a paper,” I say.

“You don’t have to lie to me,” she says and tucks her long, blond curls behind her ears. “I already know that you were with RJ last night.”

I snap my head toward her.

“I know they take Ayahausca. And I can tell you took it. It’s not easy to hide,” she says and shrugs her shoulders, letting her black silk scarf fall to one side.

“You know RJ?” I ask.

“I know him well enough to stay away from him,” she says.

“What do you mean?”

“He is not a shaman. He is the leader of that cult and he controls their minds.”

She steps away from the bookshelf and motions for me to follow her. “Come.”

The back of Claudia's bookstore resembles a cross between a religious temple and a teenage girl's bedroom. Altars stand against each wall, one for each season. Clothes are tossed around the room and over the couch. Books and candles fill every inch of floor.

"Sit," she says and pulls out a chair from the card table in the center of the room. "And have some warm milk with spices. It will make you feel good." She brings over a warm mug and sits opposite from me.

"I feel fine," I say and sip the milk.

She spreads tarot cards across the table and studies them hard.

"I always wanted to learn how to read tarot cards," I say.

"It's not too late," she says and glances up at me.

My eyes scan over the cards and finally rests on the final card, the destiny card, the ten of swords. It pictures a body face down with ten swords stabbed into its back. I know this one. It came up once just before I graduated college when I was full of drive with no direction.

"I know this one," I say and point at the ten of swords. "My destiny, my downfall."

"You create your own destiny," she says.

*Destiny.* A catch-22 of words. You move through life toward your predetermined destiny, but at the same time, you create it along the way.

\*\*\*

Maybe I shouldn't go back to the camp, but I can't help myself. I go because I



want to observe more, learn more. I want to see the world pulse again. I want to see it stretch out from every object further and further until everything pulses in unison.

The fire is already burning when I get back.

“Welcome, I’ve been expecting you,” RJ says and walks over to greet me when he spots me, his arm around a boy who reminds me too much of Drew with his pale skin and transparent eyes. “This is Chad. He’ll be joining us tonight.”

Chad doesn’t respond. He hardly looks like he’s alive.

Drew lies stretched out on the ground next to the fire. The girl with the bangles holds her hands over his body, her eyes closed in full concentration.

\*\*\*

After chanting, after drinking the Ayahausca, the girl with curly hair and bangles walks to the center of our circle next to the fire and undresses. She lies down and stretches her arms out to the sides. RJ passes around a few small hand drums. The rhythm matches the pulsing of the land. When RJ emerges from the tepee again, he carries a lit candle in one hand and a small metal pail with the other. He stoops next to the girl, sets the pail beside her, and pours the wax over her stomach. She clenches her fists and squeezes her eyes tight. He pours the wax down her arms and legs. She doesn’t scream though her face distorts in pain.

What the hell is going on? No one seems disturbed by the show. I motion to Drew.

“Initiation,” he says low, not taking his eyes off the girl.

RJ picks up the pail and dumps it over her stomach. Several small brown

scorpions scurry around the wax-topped girl.

Chad runs. No one in the group notices or cares. So without thinking too much about it, I chase him.

“Chad!” I yell.

He doesn't stop. We run further from the camp. It's hard to make out where we are headed in the dark. Under the new moon and distant stars, I can only sense his motion.

“Chad!”

He stops and I nearly smack into him. He turns to face me, reaches in his jacket pocket, and pulls out a small hand gun—the same gun with the same heart beat pulse from RJ's book. He looks down at the gun and points it at me.

“I know all your darkest secrets,” he says.

His eyes dance on his face, light with no past or future, nothing is there. He looks up into the wide, desert moonless sky and motions the gun across his chest in the form of a cross. He puts the gun in his mouth, pulls the trigger, and falls to the ground. The pulsing of his body slows and wavers, but it doesn't stop. All the secrets he claimed to know are locked inside of him forever, pulsing.

I could lie and say that I screamed. I could lie and say that I ran. But I didn't do either. I sat down and watched the sky. I sat down and watched the stars glow and expand until they reached down and pulsed with the earth.

\*\*\*

I awake with Drew sitting next to me on the red clay ground, his head in hands,

crying. The sun rises just over the horizon and the world comes to life with color.

Chad's body is gone. I don't know if his suicide really happened or if I dreamed it all. I don't even know if he ever really existed.

\*\*\*

Drew drives me to Winslow Monday morning to see about my car. Neither of us mention the weekend in Sedona.

“What are you going to do when you get to Tahoe?” he asks.

“I have a job lined up there for the winter. Nothing special, selling ski gear and swimsuits and whatnot. Then I guess I'll just see what happens from there. What about you?”

“Oh, classes. That's about it really. Maybe send my squirrel conspiracy story off to *Weekly World News*.”

“You really should.”

We don't look at each other, only the straight stretch of highway ahead of us. He drops me off at the mechanic's shop and makes a dumb joke about standing on the corner.

“I'll tell Randy you stopped by,” he says and waves from his window as he pulls away from the curb.

## Saturn Return

*Been showed the way  
 Hinted around  
 Never been certain  
 Never been found  
 Fakin' away  
 Pretendin' around  
 --moe.*

**Root: Basic Needs**

Ariel and I hike into the forest behind the University to the middle of the Pogonip trail and set up ceremony to give thanks to the north, south, east, and west, to the gods of the sky, to the gods of the underworld. My bare feet press firmly into the dirt, my arms stretch wide like wings, and I close my eyes. My tattered mint green sun-dress wisps across my knees. The scent of sage grows stronger as Ariel moves the burning leaves in front of my face. Ariel cleanses my energy. Ariel says that my energy needs to be cleansed if I'm going to live with her and Lucy. *We need to be riding on the same wavelength*, she had said. This is only the beginning.

\*\*\*

"Your first Saturn Return is the most important phase of your life," Ariel tells me.

"It's a lot like giving birth," Lucy continues. "Painful, but life changing. It sets you up for adulthood. You either decide to follow your dharma or resist it."

Ariel, Lucy, and I sit in the middle of our spacious living room, cross-legged on the hardwood floor. The light from the candles dances and refracts on the high vaulted ceiling.

"You were led to us for a reason," Ariel says.

They had run an ad in the paper seeking a house mate. They weren't exactly what I was seeking, but they were the best of the bunch I had called—six were lonely men seeking a female companion, one had too many cats, and two couldn't speak English. I just wanted a place to live. Ariel and Lucy apparently wanted a student.

\*\*\*

I stretch my body over the bar and gaze into the plant filled atrium. My lone customer stares into the greenery as well, his eyes glazed over, straw in his mouth. Before I moved to Santa Cruz, I had never bartended, but it seemed like a reasonable way to make the most amount of money while exerting the least amount of brain power and effort. So I lied on my resume and took the first job offered to me.

A man appears in front of me and slaps a fiver on the bar. He loosens his tie and untucks his shirt.

“Can I help you?” I ask.

“This is a bar isn't it?” he says and laughs. “What do you think I want?”

My God. Is this what the other side is like? I pour him a gin and tonic. And another. And another.

Settled in Santa Cruz—I have a home and a job that doesn't hire in seasonal increments. I have always measured my life by the changing seasons, but there are no well defined seasonal changes here. For the first time ever, a nebulous existence confronts me.

\*\*\*

**Sacral: Creativity**

Lucy stands in the east corner of the room and plays her didgeridoo—her cheeks so full of air and her face so red she might burst at any moment. Ariel and I dance wildly around the apartment. The deep drone vibrates through the rooms. Ariel grabs my wrists and spins. We spin so fast that if we let go we would fly out beyond the walls forever spinning into the ether. We finally slow and collapse onto the floor laughing so hard that we almost forget to breathe. *Today we are going to play*, Ariel had told me during our dawn sun salutations.

\*\*\*

“The seal of today is the monkey,” Ariel says. “The monkey represents magic and playfulness, and illusion.”

Ariel, Lucy, and I sit on the floor and eat breakfast Japanese style, and I listen to the lesson of the day as I do every morning.

“According to Jose Arguelles, if we let go of our old Gregorian ways and follow the Tzolken and the thirteen moon cycle, life will make much more sense,” Lucy says. “Pay attention to the seal and tone of the day and live by them accordingly.”

I try to follow their advice, but I end up missing two days of work and take up watercolor painting for a week. Ariel and Lucy are part-time students at the University—perma-fixtures in each other's existence, two branches of one person who is not fully there. They don't need to exist in the real world.

\*\*\*

**Solar plexus: Power**

The pot on the stove rumbles like it might boil over. I turn down the heat and reach for the lid.

“No!” Ariel scolds me and jumps between me and the stove.

I step back unsure how to respond.

“Personal, personal,” she says and shoos me out of the kitchen.

I make my way outside to the porch and sit on the ground next to Lucy. Deep in her meditation, she doesn't acknowledge me at all. Our apartment sits at the western entrance to the University campus and faces out toward the bay. On a clear afternoon, the cusp of the bay becomes visible and the edges of Monterey become well defined. After the fog rolls over the water, the land appears to float above the clouds.

A moment later Ariel steps outside, tea cup in her hand.

“Here,” she says and sets the cup down in front of me hard. “You interrupted the purity process. It's ruined.” She turns on her heels and stomps away.

I sniff the dark liquid and take a sip. A familiar bitter taste fills my mouth. I stand up and knock the tea cup on its side. I lean over the rail of our balcony porch and puke.

Many South American tribes use Ayahuasca for spiritual ceremonies, to have visions for healing and guidance. I once met a man who used it to have power over his cult members. Ariel and Lucy use it for purification, for cleansing. They purge their bodies and mind of all the junk they collect from living in the modern world.

\*\*\*

I lie in the middle of our living room floor. A candle sits at my head and one at my feet. Ariel and Lucy sit on either side of me, and their hands press the center of my stomach.

"A bundle of seventy-two thousand nerves extend from your solar plexus," Ariel says. "If you do breath of fire everyday, it will make your nerves strong and give you power."

Lucy nods in agreement.

I lift my head slightly until I see my toes. Ariel and Lucy shut their eyes. My head falls back onto the hard floor.

I let them do this to me. I let them have their fun hoping that I might get something out of it, something worthwhile, something that I can look back on later in life and say *gee I'm sure glad I got to experience that*.

\*\*\*

A sly man in a button up shirt leans over the bar and glares at me. A regular on Tuesday afternoons, he normally bides his time sipping vodka and asking me ridiculous questions concerning where I'm from, where I've been, what my plans are. Questions that I answer with questions in return. He's had only one drink, but the way he slits his eyes at me isn't so friendly. I set his second drink in front of him and wait for him to hand over his money.

He waves a twenty in front of my face.

"You know, if you'd dress a little better, I mean, don't be afraid to show off a bit, chances are I'd leave you a bigger tip."



I snatch the glass away from him.

“Get out,” I say.

“What?” he says like he really didn't hear me.

“If you ever come back during my shift again, I will physically assault you. Don't underestimate the power of my small fist,” I say calmly, hands on my hips.

He slides out of his chair and backs away from the bar.

“I'm going to talk to the management about this,” he says and flips me off.

I've never threatened anyone before. I don't know where I got the ability to do it, but a wave of satisfaction soars through my body that lasts for days.

\*\*\*

### **Heart: Compassion**

Occasionally, we take in transients traveling through town. *A great way to connect with the outside world*, Ariel tells me. She meets these people in coffee houses and meditation circles. She invites them to stay as long as they need for the exchange of ideas and artwork.

Calli paints robots and cats on all of our living room walls. And her lover, Heather, does somersaults back and forth across the floor. Her *art* she calls it.

Elle and Pete wear long Indian skirts and chant Hare Krishna and beat their feet against the hard wood of the floor in time to the mantra.

“Pete told me he was Jesus reincarnated,” Ariel whispers to me during their chant.

After dinner, Pete initiates us as Hare Krishnas in exchange for lodging.

“Is it true he thinks he's Jesus reincarnated?” I ask Elle while she carefully places

cushions around a candle and prepares for a reading of our past lives.

“For God's sake, for Christ's sake, for Pete's sake,” she says and falls over in hysterical giggles.

\*\*\*

### **Throat: Communication**

From the pathway up to our apartment, I can see Elle knocking on the neighbor's door. Her tiny body and violet hair shimmer. It's only been two weeks since she and Pete came through the first time. Had she already forgotten where we lived?

“Elle,” I yell from the path. “Elle, it's the other door, the blue door.”

She knocks again before she acknowledges me. Our eyes lock and I stumble and fall sideways. She runs down the stairs, her long dress dragging behind her.

“I'm ok, I'm ok,” I say and stand. My ankle aches when my foot touches the ground, and I fall again.

“We live in the blue door,” I say and let her help me up the stairs.

“Oh, I just saw the red door, and well, since Ariel's from a red tribe, I just assumed.”

“It doesn't always work out that way,” I say.

Damn her. Damn her for making all the wrong connections. Next time, I'll just keep my mouth shut.

\*\*\*

I limp around at work all week and start to question how much more of this I can take. At five sharp, Ron takes his seat at the bar.

"How's it going, Marty?" he says and lights a cigarette. Like most of my favorite customers, he likes to break the rules.

"Not so well," I say and throw my leg up onto the bar. "I twisted my ankle."

He glances at my leg and lets me continue.

"I think I'm starting to go a little batty. What the hell is wrong with the people here? I thought this was the land of enlightenment, bohemian paradise. The people I met in Tahoe raved about this place. They were normal." I pace down the length of the bar and back and wave my arms about wildly. "They weren't riding the waves of the Tzolken or chanting Hare Krishna or holding cleansing ceremonies on every full moon. I'm beginning to lose faith in...everything," I shrug and continue to rant for a good fifteen minutes before I remember I haven't served him his drink.

"You can always have faith in symbol systems," he says. "All man made symbol systems work because they are precisely designed to do so. That's the way they were created—that's why math works, that's why astrology works, the Tarot works, the I-Ching works, that's why any calendar system works."

Ron has a PhD in mathematics and makes fractal art for fun. He knows the inner workings of life in ways that I will never understand.

\*\*\*

### **Third Eye: Clarity**

I awake in the middle of the night, turn on the lamp that softly illuminates my room, and find Ariel sifting through my belongings.

"What the hell are you doing?" I ask, groggy and confused.

“Shhhhhh,” she says and places her finger over her lips, “go back to sleep. You're dreaming.”

“I am not dreaming,” I say and sit up.

She shuts my dresser drawer and leaves my room fast.

“Why don't people ever fucking listen to me?” her voice echoes down the hall.

\*\*\*

“I think you're an alcoholic,” Ariel says to me first thing when I walk into the living room the next morning.

She sits at her altar and finger paints flowers. Lucy wasn't at home.

“You're delusional. I hardly drink. Don't assume because I work at a bar that I drink like I'm a patron.” I stand in the middle of the room, helpless and violated.

She meets her eyes with mine, the bright green flecks in them shimmer in the sun light. “When I look at you, I can see the demons dancing in your soul.” She sighs and focuses her attention back to her painting. “We're trying to help you, but it's not working. I think your job has gotten in the way of your dharma path. You're a lost cause.”

That's it. I dress as fast as I can and leave the apartment. What the hell is she talking about? Who is she? Where is she getting this information from?

\*\*\*

I walk down Pacific Avenue a few blocks to release the frustration building inside of me before I decide I need coffee. I pass a man wearing a pink dress and decorated in clown make up, two tone deaf street musicians, five homeless men who heckle me when I don't stop to give them money, and a group of kids with mohawks huddled in a circle

wearing black leather jackets with anarchy patches.

I run into the first coffee house I see and find Lucy at a table reading my copy of *Dharma Bums*. I order a coffee and sit down across the table from her.

"You could have asked if you wanted to borrow it," I say and sip my coffee.

"I know." She doesn't elucidate.

"What's going on? Why do I suddenly feel like I'm not a part of this household anymore? Last week we burned candles on the beach at four in the morning. During the night, I caught Ariel going through my dresser then this morning she told me that I was a lost cause."

"Happy birthday," she says and looks up from the book and smiles.

"My birthday was last month."

"Today is spectral storm, your galactic birthday."

I sip my coffee and study the way Lucy's eyes scan my face. It's as though she's searching for some otherworldly presence that she and Ariel possess and embrace. I had written in my notebook that drifting from one existence into another has an appeal that makes other people want to know you, until they really get to know you. I didn't completely believe what I had written until now. I will never understand the Tzolken. I will never remember everyone's galactic birthday. I will never fully be like Lucy and Ariel.

"I'll see you later," I say.

Outside, rain pours from the sky, from clouds that ten minutes before were not there. I slouch against the entrance to the coffee shop, close my eyes, and let the rain

pour over me. When I was still in college back east, I would meditate to the rhythm of the rain before I really knew what meditation was. I would walk around for hours in the rain. I would open all the windows to my apartment to get a better sense of it. I knew nothing of cleansing ceremonies back then, but every time a thunderstorm passed through the electricity in the air zapped the muckiness away.

\*\*\*

I trudge back to my car. A speck of sunlight shoots through the clouds and hits the side of a tin door and bursts open.

Before Kerouac moved to Desolation Peak to work as a fire lookout, he spent a good chunk of time studying Zen Buddhism as well as drowning himself in alcohol. His friend and teacher Japhy told him that he would never reach enlightenment if he kept drinking, that he would most likely die drunk and be reborn a bartender to pay off his karma. Ariel and Lucy must be trying to make a connection between Jack's travels and alcoholism and my own travels and arbitrarily chosen job, but the piece of the puzzle they're forgetting is that Japhy changed his mind a couple hours later.

\*\*\*

### **Crown: Liberation**

I quit my job in the middle of my next shift—one too many drinks spilled down the bar, shrill drunken giggling, mindless garbled discussions, my pail stuffed full of money.

No one is home. I stand dazed at my disarrayed room—my lamp knocked over, my sheets strung off my bed, crystals of all colors and sizes placed methodically around

the room, one in each corner, against each wall, and three in the center.

The front door opens. I hurry and hide under my bed. Ariel and Lucy's voices echo through the rooms.

"Do you think it will work?" Lucy asks.

"She's here," Ariel says. "I can sense her."

I squeeze my eyes shut and hold my breath when I hear them enter my room.

Why am I hiding? What the hell am I hiding from? What would be the consequences of being found? I slide out from under the bed, walk past Ariel and Lucy to the front door, and leave. I walk to the edge of campus before I notice I'm still holding my breath. I exhale and press my shoes into the wet, soggy earth. I strain my eyes until I can see through the thick, rainy fog, until I can see the sharp edge of Monterey on the other side of the bay.

The next morning I pack up my room and move out. I drive to the beach, sit in my car, and watch the heavy winter waves batter the sand over and over again.

## Southern Cross

*When you see the Southern Cross for the first time,  
 you understand now why you came this way  
 'Cause the truth you might be runnin' from is so small.  
 But it's as big as the promise,  
 The promise of a comin' day.*  
 —Stephen Stills

I fall to my knees and beat the sandy beach with the palm of my hand and pray. I pray to the Universe to give me some goddamn direction and get me the hell out of Santa Cruz. Something that I've always known in the back of my mind, but could never fully accept is that the universe always provides, but not necessarily in the ways you'd expect or even want. I hug my backpack close to my body and fall asleep. Did anyone out there get my message?

\*\*\*

*I saw you sleeping on the beach last night and couldn't bring myself to wake you. You sure looked like you needed the rest. It didn't occur to me that it wasn't their car, but that they were robbing you—until it was too late. Sorry dear. You're welcome to come stay with me if you need to get yourself together. I head out tomorrow. You can find me here (see pinhole). Just tell the locals you're looking for Leo. They all know me here. I'll see you next week. —Leo*

I sit in my car and take a good hard look at the postcard—a volcano fills the picture behind a body of water, a man boating across the water, a pin hole pushed through the left edge of the postcard where land and water meet. *I live here*—it says. Who the hell witnesses a robbery and leaves you a postcard telling you about it? But he's right.



They took everything they could lug away fast—all my clothes, my books, my CD collection. Nothing I can't replace over time really. But, damn. I slam my head on the car horn, but it only releases a weak beep.

\*\*\*

The coffee shop smells like burnt coffee which I find incredibly appetizing at eight in the morning. I sort through the contents of my bag, my remaining possessions—money stash, notebooks, pen, identification, three I-Ching coins I swiped from Ariel's apartment before I fled. Everything I need to get the hell out of California. Where do I go from here? The postcard pokes out between the pages of one of my notebooks. I turn it over and read the information printed in the top left corner—Santiago-Atitlan, Guatemala. Prayer answered. Why not? I have the money. I have nothing to fucking lose. I write in my notebook that this trip will be like a scavenger hunt—life wanting to play games. I will no longer be the pawn; I will be the opponent. And when and if I do find Leo, I will throw my arms up in victory. The important matter is that I have direction out of here.

\*\*\*

Lake Atitlan is not the easiest destination. I fly into Guatemala City, take a shuttle to Antigua—one hour ride, take shuttle number two into Panajachel—four hour ride over mountainous, rocky terrain. I grip my bag and rest my head against the shuttle window. No one speaks to me though many of the other riders can clearly speak English, and they chatter endlessly about where they've been, where they're going. Worldly people who have a grip on life, they have the reins. What makes them think that I'm *not*

one of them? But then again, what makes them think I can speak English?

The shuttle drops me off at the boat docks in Panajachel. From here, I take a ferry across Lake Atitlan to Santiago. Once my feet step off the boat, four children harass me wanting to carry my bag, wanting to fetch a taxi for me. I want to swat at them like flies, but I grind my teeth and smile instead.

"I'm just going to walk around for awhile," I say and walk fast away from them.

One boy with long black bangs that hide his eyes chases me down the street.

"Please, please," he begs.

I run. I run away from the docks and into the street lined with vendor after vendor after vendor.

\*\*\*

I'm on a hunt for a man named Leo.

"Leo," I say to an old woman selling silk scarves and point at the pinhole in the postcard.

She stares at the postcard and mumbles something that I don't recognize as Spanish. She turns away from me and points up the road further. I ask three more vendors. They all have the same reaction and point in directions leading further from the village. I have no idea if they understand what I'm asking. I have no idea where they are sending me, if anywhere at all. I later write in my notebook that my hunt for Leo was a metaphor for my existence. Life sending me on a wild chase, but never really getting me anywhere.

I end up on a road with an upward grade that looks down over Lake Atitlan. I

move slow through the mild air until the weight of my bag and the stain on my legs force me to stop. I perch myself on the short stone wall that separates the road from steep edge. Women in skirts of reds and oranges and purples line the shores and scrub their colorful clothes against the slabs of rock. They come and go with baskets of laundry atop their heads. Bicyclists whiz by me. A truck load of men and boys in tattered worker clothes wind up the slope. A group of uniformed school girls chase the truck until it slows, and they hop on the back with the workers. The driver eyes me then quickly accelerates.

The road leads me to a small restaurant that overlooks the lake.

“Leo,” I say to the young, bored bartender who looks anything but native. I show him the postcard and point to the pinhole.

“Leo?” He says. “Yeah, I know a guy named Leo. He stops in every once in awhile for breakfast.”

“Do you know how I can find him?”

“He lives down the coast a few miles. Only way you can get there is by boat,” he says and pours two shots of whiskey. “On the house.” He pushes one of the shots in front of me.

I take the shot. My stomach cringes, and the room fuzzes as all the blood rushes out of my head.

\*\*\*

“Have some tea.” A man with peppered hair and a shaggy goatee stands over me, a cup of tea in his hands. The steam rises off the top making his face hazy and unreal.

An unfamiliar planked ceiling stretches far above me. No barstools sit in my peripheral vision. I'm not in the bar anymore.

Where am I?

"The last time someone offered me a cup of tea I hallucinated for three days and came to in a Japanese tea garden with silver fingernails and passion flowers braided through my hair," I say and kick the thick blanket off me.

"Oh, no. It's Jasmine tea," he says and lowers the cup for me to take it.

"Are you Leo?" I ask and sip the tea with caution.

"I am. Nice to meet you, Marty."

"How the hell do you know my name?" I sit up too fast and the dizziness knocks me back down.

"Your passport. My buddy Chuck, the bartender you met, had to check for an I.D. in case we needed to get you to a doctor. Nice boy, very thorough."

"He tried to kill me."

"He didn't try to kill you. You just had a bad reaction to the alcohol." Leo stands up and walks out of my sight.

"Bad reaction? What do you mean bad reaction? I've never had a *bad reaction* before."

"Taken any funny drugs lately?" His voice echoes through the room.

"Maybe."

"Yeah. There are some things out there that don't mix well with alcohol."

I thump my legs on the floor. My eyes scan the room—the high ceiling, the lack of furniture except a table and a couple chairs, stone artifacts everywhere. I sit up slowly.

“Don't like furniture much do ya, Leo?”

Leo sets a large pot of soup on the unsteady wooden table. “No. I only live here part of the year so I don't need much. That, and I got robbed once and never replaced anything.” He pulls a chair out for me. “Eat up.”

“Why'd you leave the postcard?” I ask and sit.

He pulls the other chair to the table and sits with me. “Why'd you leave your car unlocked with so much stuff in it?”

“How did you know I would come?” I ask.

“How did you know I wasn't lying about living here?”

“I didn't. Why do you keep answering me with questions?”

“Why do you need to make sense of everything?” He leans back in the chair, puts his hands behind his head, and raises his eyebrows like he's got me cornered.

“I stopped trying a long time ago.”

“Then stop asking so many questions,” he says.

The pot of soup sits between us, steaming. I start to ask where the bowls and spoons are, but I don't. If I stop asking questions, maybe I'll get some answers. But like an addict, I can't stop.

\*\*\*

Too many people begin to ask why I came to Lake Atitlan. Like metaphors and memories, my answers morph.

"To see the world," I say to a boy with long, black dreadlocks and patches on his knees.

He hands me the joint he's been smoking, and I accidentally drop it into the water at the Lake's edge.

"To better understand myself," I say to a woman dressed in white silk at an early morning Sadhana practice.

She points to the east as the sun moves up over the horizon and smiles.

"To discover what ails my soul," I say to an old medicine man.

He hands me an Ayahuasca root. Later that night I boil the root and pour the tea into the ground, watering Leo's *Salvia Divinorum* plants.

"The truth," Leo demands, hands on his hips, table set for tea.

"I needed an escape route," I say and push myself into a headstand against a bare wall. "I got to know some people all too well."

Years later at a Balinese ashram, I confide in my neighbor that I don't have a past, that everything happens simultaneously, that there is no such thing as a past. A professional escape artist, he calls me.

\*\*\*

Leo farms coffee, and while I stay with him, I farm coffee too. Coffee trees line Leo's property from his house down the hill to the Lake. Every other morning we get up with the sun, we help the native workers pick coffee berries off the trees, pull the beans from the berries, shuck them, then set them in the sun to dry. We take the dried beans and roast them on Leo's stove. Coffee. When you think about coffee production

on a large scale, all the steps involved, I find it amazing there is a constant supply wherever you go.

I roll my jeans to my knees, tie a white bandanna on my head to keep my hair back, and meditate on the motions involved in the production of coffee. How did I get here? Where is the lesson? Life's pawn on the chess board. Next move—Guatemalan coffee cultivation.

\*\*\*

Lake Atitlan is a deep caldera nestled between the mountains and volcanoes of the Guatemalan highlands. Indigenous Mayans who speak little Spanish and even less English inhabit the villages that surround the lake, so far from the rest of the world. The women wear colorful embroidered skirts and tops, often times not matching. The younger girls wear high-heeled shoes and carry modern purses with their traditional dresses—caught somewhere between ancient culture and modern times.

I meander through the market buying fresh vegetables and wonder if the vendors are over charging me because of my faded jeans and blue eyes.

\*\*\*

“I can't decide,” I say and sip on my coffee, “if I miss anyone or anything at all.”

The girl across from me shifts forward, her dirty, brown dreadlocks fall over her shoulders. She sighs and runs her fingers over the rim of her coffee mug. She sighs as though I'm a lost cause, another escape victim too afraid or too poor to get to the other side of the world so I head south down the coast losing friends and belongings along the way.

We sit cross-legged on our cushions and gaze out over the lake from our rooftop table.

"Having a purpose in life is overrated anyway," she finally says.

San Pablo is full of travelers looking for a purpose in life. I write in my notebook that I can't decide if life is winning or losing this game of chess. Years later I decide that life wasn't playing chess after all. It was playing chutes and ladders.

\*\*\*

I toss the I-Ching coins onto Leo's kitchen table. Leo sits across from me and stares intently at the coins. I toss them six times.

"What is my goddamn purpose?" I ask.

Leo fingers my coins. "The Wanderer," he says.

"No shit. Tell me something I don't know." I toss the coins six more times.

"No change," Leo says and folds his hands together.

What if he's making it all up? What if he's fucking with my life?

\*\*\*

"So, what do you know about Leo?" I ask his neighbor one morning at the shore preparing to take the kayuko over to Santiago.

"He grows a lot of coffee," the old Shaman says and swims further out from the shore.

"Enlighten me a little," I shout and throw my arms out toward him. "Does he know how to read the I Ching? Is he trustworthy?"



He swims closer. "You're the one living with him. You could probably answer that better than me."

"I'm just visiting," I say and step one foot into the boat.

"Wait," he shouts and swims over to the bank.

He places his hands on my shoulders and faces me toward land.

"What do you see?" he asks.

"A hill," I say.

"Follow me," he says and slips on his shoes.

We hike up the hill between Leo's property and his. At the top, he tells me to look down.

"What do you see?"

"The lake."

"Does the hill look different from up here?"

"Downward slope," I say.

"Look," he says and points to the odd, narrow ridges down the slope.

He hurries back down the hill and motions for me to follow. At the bottom, he jumps into Leo's kayuko.

"Come on," he says.

A few yards into the water he stops.

"Look," he says and points toward the hill.

The ridges that I hardly noticed before jut out prominently. A pyramid pops out of the land like a 3D picture. The now obvious angles overgrown with crops of corn and

coffee, with houses landscaped into the side of it.

"A pyramid," I say.

"What do you know about pyramids?"

"They hold all the mystery in the world," I say and try not to sound too sarcastic.

"Well done," he say and begins to row the boat back toward land. "Now you've seen a pyramid, walked on a pyramid, *lived* on a pyramid. You would not have done that if you weren't here."

I always end up in the same place. I am here.

\*\*\*

Leo's other neighbor, Maya, who keeps her lawn manicured, invites me over to lay in her soft grass and stare at the stars. She runs the meditation center in San Marcos. The first sunrise I met her she introduced herself as a goddess then burst into a hysterical laughing fit because laughing is pure medicine she told me. A star gazing, meditating, self proclaimed goddess—she knows who she is, she knows where she's going.

"If you look just above the horizon, you can see the Southern Cross. It's only visible this far north certain times of the year." She points over a dark volcano and swishes her finger in an X. "See."

The cluster of stars shine bright. It's hard to see what's hidden in there.

"There's no mythology behind it, no grand story of how or why it's there. Like the north star, it guided people," she says.

"Guided them toward what, where were they headed?"

"South," she says.

\*\*\*

I melt the wax around the base of the candle and let it drip onto the window seal. I press the long candle stick into the wax and let it dry steady. The flame reflects off the window and illuminates my face and the spacious near empty room behind me. Leo's house doesn't have electricity, in fact, no one who lives on Leo's side of the lake has electricity. No roads lead to the large rustic homes pressed into the base of the pyramid where boats bob at each dock.

Leo appears in the reflection. "For the love of God, child, don't be burning candles in my house. We don't have home owner's insurance in this part of the world," he says. I blow out the candle and he disappears.

I feel my way up the stairs and fling myself onto the bed. I press my forehead against the window and search for the Southern Cross.

\*\*\*

I wake to the sound of Leo crushing coffee every morning just before the sun rises. I alternate my days cultivating coffee and meditating with the goddess Maya. Every night I fall asleep staring out the big window of the loft bedroom searching for the Southern Cross, searching for some meaning in my existence, trying not to ask too many questions. At some point, I had written down that the sky holds all the secrets to life. You just have to know how to decipher it. The Greeks and Romans and Mayans had the sky figured out. They had an answer for everything.

The morning I leave Guatemala I shake Leo's hand then I hug him.

"Thanks for letting me crash."

“No problem,” he says and shrugs a weak shrug. “I hope I gave you the guidance you needed.”

*Guidance.* Sure, he gave me guidance. He guided me here. I always assumed guidance needed to have meaning. I guess it doesn't. Year later when I'm visiting a South Pacific Island, I finally see the Southern Cross shining bright overhead, guiding travelers in the right direction as it always has.

## Northern Lights

*So dynamic is life, staring into the sight's  
Not right, but wrong in a good way.*

--Ween

\*\*\*

I follow close behind Randy and mesh our footprints together—hiking boot on hiking boot. But his stride becomes too wide, and I end up leaping from one step to the next. He turns his head at the commotion of my leaps, at my heavy breath. I only see the shade from his NAU cap covering his eyes. He stops without warning and I slam into his back.

“Shhhhh,” he says and points his Jupiter finger into the air.

“Shhhhh,” I mimic him, low and eerie like an echo.

A slate of ice as far ahead as I can see marks the end of the trail. Mendenhall Glacier. The ice drips slow in the August sun. It's trying to keep cool, hold back the sweat. We approach the glacier with caution as though it's a wild animal. The landscape doesn't have the same vastness as it does from the peak of a mountain in the Rockies or from gazing down a long stretch of desert highway, but it makes its presence. The flat slick slabs of rock and large mound of ice reflect sapphire blue pools between its crevasses.

“Cool,” I say breathless and stoop to touch the ground.

Randy gives me a sideways glance. “Well, then you're going to love this,” he says and motions for me to follow him.

We stand under the entrance to a shallow cave in the ice and catch the drips of

melting glacier water in our mouths.

*Fill my soul, fill my soul, fill my soul*

\*\*\*

Two days earlier before I left for Alaska, a girl wandered into the bar for a drink, for something familiar—just moved back to this sleepy California ski town from six years living in Las Vegas. *Why'd ya move back*, a regular asked her. *To find my soul again*, she answered in the most longing, sad way. Her body slouched over the bar, her eyes sagged with premature aging. I tapped my pen against the wood of the bar top and again against my coffee mug and made note of the girl in my notebook under the heading Lesson. Years later I look back at the note—was it the girl I wanted to remember or was it the vague lesson?

Above exploring the interior, above helping my friend move back to the lower states, I'm on a hunt. As I drifted from place to place, from one life to the next, never quite filling that void of existence, pieces of my soul scattered behind me in all directions. And after a long while when the emptiness became unbearable, I knew my soul was spread too thin.

\*\*\*

I've been in Auke Bay just over 24 hours, and I've already lost track of days. Jet lag and day light—long, long day light. It's hard to decipher when one day switches over to the next. Lost in time and space. I finger the globe on top of Randy's dresser until I find Juneau, just north of Juneau. I am here. And just to be dramatic, I pick up Randy's flashlight he keeps at his bedside and shine it at such an angle to the globe as to mimic

the sun. This is my reality.

“What do you do with such long days when you're not hiking or working?” I ask Randy over breakfast.

“Sleep a lot,” he says and swipes his arm across the cluttered coffee table to make room for our cereal bowls. “In fact, I think I'll take a nap after I eat.”

Randy sleeps and hikes more than anyone I've ever met. He knows the secret to getting more out of life by exerting the least amount of effort. His soul is still firmly intact.

\*\*\*

Time moves so slowly here. The days are long—never ending long—slow like molasses slow—enjoy the day slow—it's not going anywhere. Dusk at 10pm—night is just down another degree. That's just the way it is with large latitudes.

Randy drives me to the End when he gets off work. The main road stretches an entire 36 miles from Juneau through Auke Bay to the north. And then it just stops. Instead of a stop sign, there's a Road Closed sign and an End sign with a sticker that says *Build the road Juneau to Skagway*.

We sit in the truck and stare down the overgrown path where no road goes.

“You know,” he finally says, “you can't drive away from here. It's like an island—the only ways in and out are by air and water. You just don't end up here, you just don't up and leave. It takes effort either way.”

I snap my head toward him. “What's your point?”

He shifts his large hazel eyes to mine. “That you're not a goddamn tumbleweed.”

He leans back and bursts out laughing in one of those hysterical kind of ways. And because Randy has that effect on me, I burst out laughing too.

I know Randy was trying to tell me he didn't like where he'd seen my life go—the constant drifting from one insane situation to the next. He didn't like the fact I blamed it all on fate, that I had no control over any of it. He never said anything beyond what he said in the truck. He didn't have to. An old, desert psychic once told us we were drawn together because of unfinished business. Maybe Randy remembers past life pieces that I don't. Maybe he's trying to fix what's been left unfinished.

\*\*\*

Randy takes me kayaking in the bay. The waves chop at us. I tilt far to the left then far to the right. Water sloshes into my kayak. My body tightens and my veins constrict. But then I let go and a surge of energy rushes my body, a natural surge, a clean surge. If I don't feel anything else ever again, at least I have felt this.

“I am Lono,” I shout and throw my arms into the air.

Years before I started out on this life long journey of sorts, back when I was still a college kid in Ohio, I got the strangest visitor early one spring morning when frost was still on the ground. The knock was loud and consistent. When I got to the door, a tall, lanky guy stood there, his shaggy hair wild, his eyes bulging.

“Is Jeremy home?” he asked and bobbed up and down, up and down.

“He's asleep,” I said and rubbed my eyes hard.

“You gotta wake him up,” he said, his voice edgy. “We gotta go...we gotta go wrestle some alligators.”



“What?”

“Gotta go before it fades away,” he said.

The boys left that morning to do God knows what. I never saw the guy again, and shortly thereafter, I never saw Jeremy again. I found an old copy of *The Curse of Lono* randomly shoved onto one of my bookshelves a few months after that morning. For some reason, I connected the two events to be more than mere coincidence. Hunter Thompson out on stormy water with a boat of junkies. The guys wrestling alligators. I wrote down in my notebook that in both cases all participants were a bunch of fearless crazies. I'm not sure what made me think any of them were fearless. Maybe I just liked the way it sounded.

*Fearlessness.* Once you shake fear, the world becomes so much bigger. Anything is possible. To be fearless and empty can be a dangerous combination—nothing to live for in a big world. Is that what my life has led up to? Is this enlightenment?

“I am Lono,” I shout again.

“Just don't tip your kayak or break your rudder,” Randy says and takes the lead.

We paddle to one of the small islands in the bay.

“Look,” Randy says and points to a small brown ball of feathers under a tall tree.

We step cautiously toward it.

“What the hell is it?” I say a bit too loud.

The ball squawks and stumbles in attempt to run from us.

“Baby eagle. It must have fallen out of its nest,” Randy says and drops his backpack. He stretches his arms out wide and leaps toward the baby.

I stand stiff, unsure if I should follow suit. The little eagle spreads its wings, stumbles a few more steps, flaps its wings, takes a couple pretty good leaps, and off it goes into the sky. Just like that. I grasp my chest and collapse to the ground in excitement.

Randy appears over me. “Did you see that?” he says and smiles big.

“Do you think it flew out of fear or fearlessness?” I ask, motionless.

“Neither,” he says. “I taught it how to fly.”

“If it was fear, it had no choice but to fly. If it was fearlessness, it chose to fly,” I say.

Randy hovers above me and waits on me to finish. He knows there's more.

“I think I'm having an existential crisis,” I finally say.

He reaches his hand down to help me up. “It's about time,” he says.

Randy and I have known each other through several lifetimes. I sense that this isn't the first time we've had this conversation.

\*\*\*

At six in the morning, Randy insists I tag along on his last day of work. Randy works as a tour guide for those cruise ships that dock in Juneau for 24 hours. Downtown Juneau is more of a tourist trap than I'm ready for at 7am. The entire water front is filled with cruise ships with names like Princess and Destiny—and God, those things are massive. Even from the top of Mount Roberts nature trail miles above the harbor half

listening to Randy drivel on about the flora and fauna to a group of uninterested retirees from Texas, the ships are monstrous, terrifying, unnatural.

“How the hell do you find these jobs?” I had asked him when he first told me he was moving to Alaska.

“I don't find them. They find me.”

I didn't ask for further explanation. Randy doesn't tell me what I want to know. He tells me what I need to hear.

The summer I met Randy, the summer we worked together in Yellowstone National Park, I asked him what brought him to the park to work. *The moose*, he told me. I laughed. I laughed so hard I slid backwards off the log where I was sitting. I wrote down what he had said in my notebook. Randy made perfect nonsense. I didn't need another answer. It wasn't what I wanted to know. It was what I needed to hear.

\*\*\*

After an afternoon nap as time drips, drips, drips and the sun does not move, Randy and I pack up his apartment. Each box stuffed full and labeled—anthropology, kitchen, stolen road signs.

“Are you excited about moving back to Arizona?” I ask. “Are you excited about going back to school?”

Randy grips the plate he's holding and stares at it like he can see his whole future in the ceramic lines. “I really don't want to leave. I don't think. I don't know. I don't know how I feel.” He glances at me over the rim of the plate. “I'm kind of freaking out.”

“What are you freaking out about?”

He doesn't answer me. He presses the plate into the box and leaves the room. I make note of his reaction, and years later I ask him about the conversation. *The interior has a way of feeding off people's souls instead of the other way around*, he tells me. *I was freaking out for you, not me.*

\*\*\*

Interior bound. I stand on the back end of the Juneau/Skagway ferry and let the cool rushing wind knock me around. The bay, the glaciers, the cruise ships all sink into the background, and I fade into another world.

*Fill my soul, fill my soul, fill my soul*

\*\*\*

The landscape flashes, a new location, a new scene after each blink.

I hold my breath at the sight of the jagged, spear-like mountains of northern British Columbia.

A sign hangs on the door of a remote Yukon gas station—*store closed, lack of employees, opened by appointment only.*

We approach the interior/Canadian border around midnight.

“Excuse me sir, is this the way to Seattle?” Randy asks the officer.

We pitch a tent and camp in the median of the highway just beyond the border kiosk. Not a car passes during the night. This is something you can't just do anywhere. Welcome to the last frontier.

\*\*\*

I flip a coin in Fairbanks—the deciding factor in which direction to go from here.

North. We turn right onto Dalton Highway, the only road heading that direction. As we head north, the mosquitoes thicken and the area grows smoky from summer fires. The air becomes increasingly hard to breathe, and my thoughts become fuzzy. I had written in my notebook that before we even got ten miles, we dodged two moose, two grouse, a dog in the road, and a passing truck with a gun pointed at us. That this was wildlife in action. Only I can't remember if they had all actually been there or if I had imagined them.

We drive for miles and miles under the ever more stationary sun. The world becomes flat. The trees small. The mountains distant, unapproachable. The pipeline runs parallel with the highway—long, long stretches of metal overrun the deadening landscape. We pass a handmade mileage post sign painted with arrows pointing in various directions—Purdhoe Bay: 450 miles, Coldfoot: 255 miles, Arctic Circle: 150 miles. At the bottom of the sign, an asterisk notes: *not exact but close enough*.

I don't know what day it is or how long we've been traveling when we finally cross the 66 parallel marker—sixty-six degrees latitude, the entrance to the Arctic Circle. Rocky, dirt roads, hard ground, and sparse thin trees—there really isn't much to see in the tundra. The vast dead, emptiness overwhelms me.

*Fill my soul, fill my soul, fill my soul*

What the hell am I doing in the Arctic Circle searching for my soul, searching for substance to fill my soul? I flipped the coin. I left it to fate. And this is what fate gives me?

Randy sets up camp and I wander the grounds for fire wood. The trees aren't much taller than me, their trunks only as thick as my arms. No animals scurrying around

here. A small cross sits just behind the 66 parallel sign with faded notes and pictures stuck to it—people paying homage to their long gone friends and relatives. Do I care about anyone enough to trek to the arctic to hold ceremony for them? Who would ask me to do such a thing and why?

Randy has a small fire going by the time I make my way back over to him.

“If we keep driving north, will we get to the Arctic Ocean?” I ask and hand over my arm full of twigs.

“Yeah, but it's not open to the public. I mean, it is, but we'd have to find a ranger or someone to take us. There's an oil company there. They aren't really into tourists.”

“So, this is it,” I say and throw my arms into the air.

“What did you expect?” Randy pokes at the fire with a stick.

“I'm really not sure. I just didn't think it would be so, I don't know, empty.”

“Welcome to the tundra,” he says.

The fire orange sun dips just below the edge of the earth around midnight then moves just along the horizon for a few hours before it begins to rise again. The night remains a perpetual state of dusk. I don't sleep at all. I stay up and watch the sun move. And just before I doze into an early morning nap, just before the sun begins its ascent, a streak of neon green flashes low in the sky. What planet am I on?

\*\*\*

Denali. We find a bar door hidden around a bend of gift shops just inside Denali Village. The lighting is dim and the floor is a mess of dirt and sticky alcohol. Good. They won't notice we haven't showered for a week or however long it's been. We slip to

a table in the corner and glance down the food menu. My eyes drift to the drink menu. I haven't had a drink in months, but the urge grips me. The last thing I should do to fill my soul is to fill it with alcohol. Kerouac filled his soul with alcohol when it became empty and that was the end of him. He died before he got to fifty. We are born and reborn until we learn our lesson. It's easy to fall into the same trap lifetime after lifetime after lifetime and never learn any new way of being.

I set my menu down and walk to the bar. My eyes graze over the bottles of liquor that fill the shelves.

“What can I get you?” the bartender asks. He's young. He doesn't really know what he's doing to people yet.

At that moment, a lady of strange sorts strides through the door dressed in black lace with feathers in her hair and wild red cat glasses—she's carrying a guitar.

“I'm here,” she announces to the bartender and leans over the bar to kiss each of his cheeks.

“When does she start?” I ask.

“Oh, she'll start right away. She's here to entertain the Normals.”

“The Normals,” I say, deadpan and scan my eyes over the barroom.

He leans over the bar. “The corporate affiliated,” he says low.

What are the odds that two former national park employees find their way into probably the only employee pub in Denali Village.

“It's a lot like having a radar,” Randy says from behind me and lays his hands on my shoulders. He leans over my shoulder and whispers to the bartender: “We're just here

for water and pizza and Miss Lou Lou up there.” He motions toward the stage then leads me back to our table.

\*\*\*

In the morning, we take a shuttle deep into Denali National Park—it's smoky like a hazy dream. Mountains plunge out of nowhere—McKinley sets back in the distance—smoke dances around her. Denali is primitive compared to other Parks. You can only get into the heart of the Park by shuttle, and there is nothing out there—no food, no filtered water, no camp sites, no trails, no rangers. Pure wilderness—you are on your own in this land. The shuttle moves slow over the one lane gravel road, over mountain passes and rivers. A mix of greens and browns and white swirl the landscape. The shuttle stops to let us stretch a bit. A group of hikers wave goodbye and head out along a river. Fearlessness. Getting lost in Denali is certain death. A breeze knocks against my back. But in all this wild beauty, fear creeps up my spine.

*Fill my soul, fill my soul, fill my soul*

\*\*\*

Glacial waters run crystal aqua blue. Stone ice. Wind chills. Rain turns from sprinkles to deluge as we slip through Canadian customs and we drive all night. I can't sleep. I have no frame of reference for my current existence. My life—a blur of broken memories, pieces meshed together that will not cohere. Have I found what I set out to find? Has my soul been filled with anything at all?

Randy pulls me close to him, wipes tears off my cheek with his free hand, and then puts his arm around my shoulder.



“What could you have possibly found that you didn't?” he finally says.

The windshield wipers flap back and forth. Out the passenger window, water streaks across the window in white, gray lines. And just for a second, a streak of green reflects off the window and disappears.

## Divided Sky

*Philosophy is a walk on the slippery rocks.  
Religion is a light in the fog.  
I'm not aware of too many things,  
but I know what I know if you know what I mean.*  
--Edie Brickell

"Could you slow down?" I shout and throw my arms into the air.

Jenn stops and looks back at me. "California has made you lazy. People crawl up here on their hands and knees and pray the entire way."

Ten steps below her, I am out of breath and exasperated; she hasn't even broken a sweat. I have hiked some mighty mountains for sure, but nothing like this. When I told Jenn I wanted to experience mountain life again, that I wanted to hike in the Andes, I hoped for some jungle paths, some Colombian wildlife, some *switchbacks*, not a vertical stone staircase, not suffering, not a goddamn religious pilgrimage.

Jenn gazes over my head, eyes glazed, and points toward the city. The view stretches to the north, west, and south over the never-ending sprawl of Bogotá smashed up against the Andes 8500 feet up—city and mountains colliding. When you are in the city, it's easy to forget you are high in the mountains though the air is thin and the terrain anything but flat, and when you climb further up into the mountains, the city glares at you until you escape its gaze. Dark afternoon clouds hover low over the city and threaten rain that will not fall. It's January, one of the driest months of the season I've been told. Back when I first met Jenn several years earlier on a lone, snow-filled mountain in Montana and she told me she was a mountain girl, this wasn't what I imagined.

Jenn is gone before I catch my breath to speak again. A donkey, loaded with

boxes of concession supplies, passes me followed by a man whacking its backside with a stick. And I am left alone on some stone stair far up in the Andes, far above Bogotá, far from my own country, far from anyone who speaks my language, far from anything familiar.

\*\*\*

I came to Colombia because of an email Jenn sent me. *Jenn is crazy, crazy*, the subject line had said. Her family had her institutionalized for several months, she wrote. My eyes scanned down the screen to a recent picture of her. She looked thin and sick—at least 20 pounds thinner than the last time I had seen her, her once brilliant violet eyes sunk back into her thin dark face. Lifeless. The tone of her email was perky despite what the image in the picture told me. She went on to tell me how she was quickly progressing through college now and how she had much better focus. No more meandering. No more leaving Colombia on a whim. This was followed by a list of all her medications.

Jenn and I had roomed together for five months back when we were ski bums in Montana, back when life on the road was still new to me, back when Jenn kept pace with me and we would drink our nights away together, back before *crazy, crazy*. Or maybe she wasn't alright back then, and I just didn't notice.

After several months of spiritual cleansing on the central coast of California to detox from odd drug habits and the brainwashing of a desert cult and a Mayan priestess, I was ready for a sign of change. And the sign was there staring back at me in the form of a girl who once told me she didn't believe in shooting stars because she had never seen one.

\*\*\*

At the peak of Cerro de Monserrate sits a church that can be seen from most anywhere in Bogotá if one were to ever look up. Jenn and I stand at the entrance of the church and peer inside. People on their knees line the walls of the sanctuary and pray to the still, lifeless statues of saints and virgins. A priest stands at a podium and speaks in monotone Spanish. Pews line the center of the room and gold pillars line the aisles. The vibrations of the church creep their way into my senses, and the hair on my arms stands on end. I am thankful I don't understand what he says.

"The moths don't ever go inside," Jenn tells me and plucks up one of the midnight blue and black over sized moths that surround the doorway on the outer edges. "They are said to hold the souls of evil spirits."

"Says who?" I ask. She hands me the moth, and I take a hard look at where its face should be. "I say they don't go in there because it's creepy as hell."

"You are a crazy. It's *gorgeous* in there." She takes me by the wrist and pulls me through the doorway.

To me, there is nothing gorgeous about a Catholic church. Sure, they can be quite elaborate but so can a Las Vegas casino. The sad vacant eyes of the statues and the coldness of the gold alter and massive pillars leave me empty and unfulfilled. I can't find anything gorgeous about people who crawl up a stone staircase on their hands and knees suffering for their existence every inch of the way.

Jenn gently nudges me. "Marty, take a picture."

A middle-aged woman with sad, dark eyes stares at me from the back pew, her

rosary clenched in her hands. Does she stare because I still hold the moth inside the church or because she has never seen a blond haired girl? I lift my camera with my free hand and snap a picture of her.

\*\*\*

Something I've learned about memory is that it changes. With each flash of memory, something new is revealed which can change the entire essence of the memory. Pictures don't morph. Pictures tell the same story again and again. In one of my favorite pictures of Jenn, she's lying on our floor in our room, rolled into a ball, a cranberry vodka drink by her head, the straw in her mouth. As I recall, it was a cold Montana night, and we drank alone until we got absurdly silly, spinning in circles. Now, the memory isn't quite so silly. I had found Jenn in that condition on the floor when I came home from work that evening. I put the straw in her mouth to make her laugh. Maybe she wasn't alright.

\*\*\*

The walk down the mountain doesn't go much better than the walk up. Jenn disappears around a bend moments into our descent, and I am left alone again. The stones are slick from an unexpected downpour which presents a whole new challenge to my lone walk. Step by step, I move as slowly as the pilgrims. The dark clouds still hang over head. What makes Bogotá so unusual is the fact that it's so close to the equator and so high in the mountains. The temperature hardly fluctuates through the year, but the air stays cool and the weather unpredictable. It's the *dry* season according to the natives.

I round another corner, each step with caution, and I come face to face with a

young couple linked arm in arm—their feet bare, their eyes closed. They take small steps, and their faces express utter pain. I step aside and let them pass. They walk slow and steady, sopping wet. I snap a picture of them and continue down the steps.

\*\*\*

I have another picture of Jenn standing barefoot next to a big stone fountain in downtown Salt Lake City. Female guards dressed in black circled the fountain at a slow, synchronized pace. I urged Jenn to jump into the water, to throw the guards into a frenzy. She gave me a weak smile and flipped me off.

That spring just before we left the ski resort in Montana, Jenn told me she planned to take a Greyhound all the way to Tampa to visit her cousins before she caught her flight back to Bogotá. I told her she certainly would not. I would take her. She had an entire month left on her visa; she was not going to see the U.S. through some foggy little window of a Greyhound bus. I had nothing better to do anyway I told her. I had over a month before I was due back in Wyoming to start my second summer season working in Yellowstone National Park. And I couldn't think of a better way to spend the month than drive across the country with a Colombian.

I was convinced she needed the experience. Jenn had spent the entire winter season either sleeping or drinking except for the few times I drug her off on hikes down to Ousel Falls or to eat mushrooms and explore the local art museums. Maybe the fact that her whole existence in Montana revolved around sleeping and drinking should have been my clue that something wasn't quite right with her.

Salt Lake City was the first stop on our cross country trek. Jenn lapsed into some

sort of abrupt emotional outburst crying and shouting when she saw all the temples and big houses in a neighborhood we happened upon. I had never seen anyone get so worked up over architecture. She rolled down the window and pointed, unable to speak.

I gripped the steering wheel in a near panic. “They have temples and big houses in Colombia. What’s your problem?”

She only hung her head out the window and let out something that sounded like a cross between a moan and a coyote howl.

I have been in Bogotá for two weeks now, and this is the fifth church we’ve toured—each of them elaborate, moths gathered on the outer edges of the doorways. I never knew Jenn to be a religious person, and as far as I can tell, she’s still not. I want to make a connection between this and what happened in Salt Lake City, but I can’t figure it out. I want to make a connection with Jenn like we had back in Montana, but I can’t figure it out. Like with Jenn and the churches, I’m grasping for a connection that’s just not there, that was never there.

\*\*\*

“Maybe I should not take them all tonight.” Jenn spreads her array of colorful pills across the coffee table in her stark, white living room. “We have to get up early tomorrow. I don’t want to be groggy.”

“What would happen if you missed a day?” I hang my hammock on the hooks in the living room walls and climb inside of it.

“I won’t be groggy,” she says and taps her fingers on the table. “Or maybe I could just shower and dress tonight so I won’t have to get up extra early. I can just get out of

bed and put on my shoes.”

“Why are we getting up so early?” I ask from the folds of the hammock.

Silence.

I look over the edge of the folds toward the table. Jenn is gone.

I lean back into the hammock, reach into my pocket, and pull out my set of mala beads. I haven't touched them since I've been in Colombia. I meditate. *I wonder...I wander...I wonder...I wander...* How is the ninety days I'm allowed to spend here in Colombia any different from the seasonal life I lived before? What is it that's different about being here? How is being here going to change anything in my life? Moving to another country isn't like shifting into another dimension. And Jenn—she's become a sort of evanescent shadow of her former self. Every time I begin to get in sight of her, she disappears.

My mind can't stay focused. Some mantras work better for stilling the mind than others. I firmly press each bead between my fingers and begin to silently chant. *I am here. I am here. I am here.*

\*\*\*

Back when I lived in Big Sur, I got up at dawn to meditate every morning. Here in Bogotá, I try to sleep as long as I can which is near impossible now that Jenn is on something that helps with her *grogginess*.

“Let's go,” she says and a door slams.

The bright snapping sun stabs me through the window and warms my body fast. It doesn't take long before the heat gets to me and I am forced out of the hammock.



Jenn's white walls are empty except for one framed picture—a desert scene at dusk. The empty highway stretches out toward the sinking sun as though it's trying to reach the sun before it disappears over the edge of the horizon.

On the evening of the second day of our road trip, we'd stopped just outside of Bryce Canyon off Highway 89 for a picnic. The dry mid-spring heat immediately went to my head when I stepped out of my car, and I got the sudden urge to flag down passing cars to invite them to join us. I waved my arms frantically in the air and shouted *picnic* at the few passing cars on the barren desert highway. Jenn sat on the trunk of my car and snapped pictures. When I motioned for her to join me, her expression changed from rather blank to outright forlorn.

“Lighten up!” I shouted.

She didn't respond. She didn't move. She just stared at me grim, like a stone. Her silky, charcoal black hair hung down in her face. Her violet eyes sparkled with a strange fierce determination. There, on the side of the road, I ran over to her, grabbed her arm, yanked her off my car, and spun her in circles until we were both too dizzy to stand. We fell into the rocky, dusty dirt. I laughed and laughed. Jenn didn't laugh. She stood, brushed the dirt from herself, pulled the American flag bandanna off her neck and tied it on her head. She stood and gazed off into the fading day of the endless desert.

I sat there in the dirt and laughed.

“You are a crazy,” she said and shook her head. She gave me a half smile when she reached down to help me stand. “I'm excited to see Flagstaff and the college. Let's go.”

\*\*\*

Jenn's apartment is in the historic district of La Candelaria—a colorful, bohemian neighborhood of endless wall murals, cobblestone streets, and restored houses that are now mostly all bars and restaurants. Tourists are hard to come by in Bogotá, but if any are to be found at all, they gravitate to La Candelaria. It's the only area of the city I'm not seen as a foreigner with my blond hair, light skin tone, and camera at my side.

When I step outside, the morning sun warms my arms and I walk slow and poke my head into all the coffee houses, into all the endless rooms, and up all the endless winding stair cases until I find Jenn. And just because I find her body doesn't mean I will find her. I don't even know where to begin looking or if I have any business to start looking. But if I'm going to live here in this foreign land for the next three months, Jenn can't keep disappearing around every corner, through every door. I don't want to chase her. I don't want to be the Alice to her white rabbit games. But once lured down the hole, the magic takes hold and the nonsense begins. Or, like a Gabriel Garcia Marquez story, reality blurs into mysticism. The deeper I chase Jenn into her world the less real it becomes.

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I find Jenn in the upper level of the Sanalejo Cafe—more plants fill the Cafe than any nursery I've seen, the walls swirl with color and pictures of mushrooms and fairies and flying elves.

“I need to move,” Jenn says and stares into her cup of coffee.

“Move? What do you mean?” I plant myself down into the large squishy chair opposite of her at the table.

Her eyes tear and she sighs. “Back when I was at Andes University, all my friends, we use to come here and talk for hours about philosophy and literature. But I'm not there anymore and all my friends have moved on.” Her slow tears turn to sobs.

“You didn't take your medication last night, did you?”

Her head bobs back and forth. This isn't like back in Montana. I can't just put my arm around her shoulder and shove a cocktail or drugs in her face. I can't force her to take her medication. So I deal with the situation the only way I know how.

“You wanna get out of here for awhile? I mean, you wanna go on a trip somewhere?” I ask, unsure. I have only been in this country for two weeks.

Jenn's head perks up. “Let's go to the coast,” she says and pulls on my jacket sleeve. “Let's go to Tayrona.”

We head downtown and spend the rest of the day making travel arrangements. Jenn empties her savings account on plane tickets, reservations, the works.

\*\*\*

The night before we leave, we wander through the city park still decorated from Christmas—lit up elves and mushrooms and flowers and cola bottles fill every inch of the park lawns. Colombians take their religion seriously, but they have some funny ideas about Christmas.

Jenn and I walk linked arm in arm for the first time since my arrival. She probably feels the need to protect me against a kidnapper as we walk through the park so

late, and I just want her not to feel so alone. Or maybe that's me. We pass a boy with shaggy hair and tattered clothes. He smiles a thin eerie smile and says something to us, voice low and shady. Jenn rolls her eyes up and begins jabbering at him in Spanish. And he jabbbers back at her. It's like a sword fight to my ears.

“What does he want?” I finally say.

“He is trying to sell us cocaine,” she says and jabbbers something back at him.

“How much?” I ask.

Jenn drops my arm. “You've got to be kidding. I thought you were completely sober.”

“I am sober, but that doesn't mean I can't know how much. Besides, I never had a coke problem. I'm not caving in to cravings.”

“Too much,” she says and pulls me away from the boy.

The boy touches Jenn's arm and speaks softly.

If Jenn is allowed to make sudden, irrational decisions, so am I. I believe that the cocaine, like fairy dust, will come in handy at the right moment.

“5000 pesos,” she finally says and sighs. “Too much.”

I stop. “Jenn, that's less than three dollars in my country. Do you understand how cheap that is?” I shove a 5000 peso bill at the boy, and he slips me a tiny bag of white powder. I shove it down into my pocket. And as a distraction to anyone who might be watching, I blind us all with my camera flash by taking a picture of a plastic elf hugging a giant cola bottle.

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The flight attendants for Avianca Airlines wear bright red dresses, red scarfs around their necks, and red pill box hats. Red is such an intense color. You'd think they'd go for something a bit more mellow while they keep you trapped in a metal compartment 30,000 feet in the air. But this is Colombia, the rabbit hole, and I'm sure that if the plane goes down, they whip off those hats, jump inside them, and fly out the windows.

I would have preferred to drive those twelve hours to the coast, but Jenn insisted that my presence would call unwanted attention to us. Days earlier at the travel agency when I had tried to protest, Jenn sighed with all the frustration she could muster. "There is high guerrilla activity in the countryside. I do not want you to get kidnapped." She has no problem wandering the streets with me late at night or buying drugs, but outside of the city, my presence is suddenly an issue.

Jenn falls asleep within the first ten minutes of take off. I reach into my bag and pull out an old copy of the *Upanishads* my teacher had given me just before I left Big Sur. I open the book to a random passage. I need some sort of guidance to get me through this trip, to help me understand where Jenn's mind has gone. *The mind is higher than the senses, and higher than the mind is the genius, and above the genius is the Mighty Spirit, and higher than the Mighty One is the Unmanifested.* I snap the book shut and fish my mala beads out of my bag. This is no time for thinking. I press my fingers around the first bead. *I am here.*

\*\*\*

"What are you going to do now?" Jenn had asked me the evening before she was

due to meet her family in Tampa. I had driven all the way to Key West without telling her we had passed Tampa by a good twelve hours. After driving so far, it seemed silly to stop when we were so close to southern-most edge of the country. We spent three days in a drunken haze wandering around the neighborhoods of mystery and color, picking tropical flowers out of all the over grown yards. But we always seemed to find ourselves in Mallory Square at the end of the day.

"I am here," I said.

"Would you stop talking like you're a goddamn ancient Chinese philosopher?"

Jenn took a long drag from her cigarette. I downed my cup of whiskey. We sat in silence on the stone wall and watched the sun melt down into the Gulf. That was the last evening I spent with Jenn in the states. I drove her back to Tampa the next day. She hardly spoke the entire drive back. Maybe it was her way of letting me go.

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When we arrive in Santa Marta, the warm Caribbean air presses against my skin and seeps into my head. I pick two large red and purple tropical flowers from a tree outside the airport and put one in my hair and one in Jenn's hair. A man says something to me angry like, but really it's hard to tell so I just smile at him.

*Manifest.* The word vibrates through my mind on the half-hour shuttle drive to Tayrona. Did I manifest this wandering lifestyle for myself back in Ohio before I ever set out for that first job in Wyoming, before I ever met Jenn, before I knew a life of constant change, or did I manifest it in a former life and now I am forced to live it? Did Jenn manifest her own manic-depressive state or did she manifest it in a former life and is

now forced to live it? I close my eyes and whack my head against the window pane of the shuttle. The flower falls out of my hair and drops to the floor.

\*\*\*

The beaches of Tayrona are the most lush I have ever seen—masses of palm trees tower overhead and coconuts lay scattered on the ground. Jenn and I run for the beach first thing. We sit in the sand and eat the juiciest mango ever and let our bodies absorb the sun. The sun never fully shines over Bogotá, but on the coast, existence is a different reality divided by the sky. Back when I first moved to the coast, when I lived in Santa Cruz, Ariel the Mayan told me that the sun transmits galactic information into us through an invisible umbilical cord that connects us to the galactic core of the universe, and that is why there is sun worship, sun salutation, that is why the sun is good for mental health. Jenn looks up at the sun and smiles big. It's the first smile I've seen on her face since I've been in Colombia. I know she's making some sort of connection, not with me, but with something, somewhere.

Jenn's world is not any better than it was before we got to the beach. The lost connection I have been looking for with Jenn is still not found. But I do believe this is the way it's suppose to be—the Universe wants it this way, and I shouldn't fight it. When you start fighting with the Universe, you can be assured your life will never be at ease.

The Caribbean water rolls up to our feet and splashes them. I reach into my pocket and pull out the tiny bag of white power and dump it into my palm.

“Make a wish,” I say and lift my hand up between our heads.

We both blow the powder off my palm into the warm air and watch it sparkle and disappear out over the water.



## Hey Jupiter

*Hey Jupiter nothing's been the same*

--Tori Amos

There is something surreal and sensational about driving through the Mojave Desert at dusk—the perpetual dead grass and rolling hills of rock. I'm somewhere between Bakersfield and Barstow—somewhere south of me sand dunes roll, somewhere north of me the Sierras loom. Breezing east into the darkness toward Flagstaff for one last hurrah with Randy in that high desert of magic and wonder. His time is up—a college graduate now. He's moving back to Alaska and not just for the season, but indefinitely.

Like a reflex, I pop in an Eagles CD—the perfect music for driving through the desert. Randy told me this as we were driving down to Sedona for an early morning hike the first time I stopped through to visit him. *Put me on a highway, babe, show me a sign.* Once again my life is packed in my car, once again road stretches for miles and miles in front of me. The past a blur of memories, notebooks, and fading photographs; the future a blur of dreams that never quite cohere.

I pull into Flagstaff at 5am and aimlessly drive around trying to find Randy's neighborhood. I can't quite remember which side of the train tracks he lives on so I stop in the center of town. The cool May mountain air hits the back of my neck when I step out of my car to check the map again. I've never been good with coordinates. I slouch against the shop at the crossroads of Route 66 and San Francisco Street. An overwhelming quietness envelops me—that quietness just as the sun reaches the horizon when the mind is most still and clear. Not a sound in the small town, not a movement. I tune in to Randy's vibration and signal to him telepathically, but only for a moment

because I never really bought into that shit. Or maybe I do buy into it, but the idea of being that aware scares me too much because it's gotten me into more trouble than I want to give it credit for.

I shuffle my thrift store hiking boots down the sidewalk about a half a block toward the rising sun and drop into sun salutation. Twelve breaths later when I open my eyes, I get into my car, and drive straight to Randy's apartment. I could spend a lifetime trying to explain how the connections are made between Randy and me, but I'd never be able to do it.

Exhaustion overwhelms me. I drag my feet up the stairs and quietly enter the sparse and morbidly decorated apartment of mutilated dolls—candle holders made from doll heads sit on the coffee table, a lamp made from a dolls body sits on the kitchen counter. I collapse into the beaten recliner that faces into a wall covered with the most recent articles from the *Weekly World News* courtesy of Randy's eccentric roommate, Drew. Whereas some people experience flashes of their entire lives just before they die, some people have flashes of their entire futures just before they fall asleep. An endless road of blurred images stretches out in my mind. I restlessly adjust myself to the lumps in the recliner and drift further and further down that road.

“Marty.”

My head turns slowly toward the voice. I peak an eye out from under my blanket. I don't know how many hours have passed, but the sun now glares through the thin curtains blinding me for a moment. An outline of a figure comes into view. Randy hovers over me—an eye patch over his right eye, a flyswatter in his left hand. Jesus

Christ. The last time I saw Randy we were running wild through interior Alaska posed as pirates with Canadian accents on a mission to howl at the midnight sun.

“Is it time to go yet?” I say and fling off the blankets.

“Kelsey's not ready. She's a slow riser,” he says and points his thumb back over his shoulder.

I smile at Randy, grab the flyswatter out of his hand, and give him a good whack over the head.

“What was that for?” he asks and runs his fingers through his shaggy brown hair.

“To keep you asking questions,” I say and push myself out of the recliner. “I'm going outside to do some yoga stretches. Let me know when you're ready to start packing up.”

Randy follows me outside and leans over the rail as I make my way down the stairs. “Hey, what happened to your hair?” he asks.

I swing my head left and right and let the thick, choppy edges brush against my neck and shoulders. “Chopped it all off.” My hair had hung most of the way down my back since I'd met Randy eight years ago.

“Why?”

“I needed the change,” I tell him.

“Your life is always changing,” he says.

I pretend not to hear him. He should understand, but then I sense her presence. I know Kelsey is standing next to him before I reach the bottom of the staircase. I know because of the tension suddenly in the air. When you know someone for years, really

know someone intuitively, you can sense subtle changes about him—the way he breathes or the way his aura squeezes tight around him or the way he doesn't respond like you expect.

I wave at Kelsey before I round the corner of the apartment building. Randy wraps his arm around her and gives her a kiss. She probably wonders why I'm tagging along on this meandering trip through the Rockies with her and her new love, why I was summoned to help them move to Anchorage. I don't know Kelsey at all aside from the few pictures Randy sent me. He met her a year ago just before he left Alaska the last time he briefly lived there. And before she met him, before he sent her a plane ticket to Arizona last month, she had never left Alaska.

The tall grass pricks the back of my neck. I'm glad my hair is short. I'm glad I get to feel new sensations like grass and wind to the neck. And the one new sensation I want to feel I don't know if it is even possible. I want to root myself into the earth and grow. I want to stay in Alaska indefinitely too. Alaska is one of the harshest environments—darkness takes over in winter, things die, people leave in herds. It would be far more challenging to always stay than to always leave. Randy fell in love with Alaska the year he spent in Juneau, and the excursions he took to explore the interior. He knew he would go back to live for good one day. I need Randy to keep me grounded, to be my constant, my anchor. But I'm not so sure how stable that support will be with Kelsey in the picture. Maybe life with Randy and Kelsey won't be too bad. Maybe I can convince Kelsey that I'll be good to have around, that I'm not just this strange wanderer from her boyfriend's past who plans to plant herself in the midst of their new life together.

I push myself into a shoulder stand and Drew's feet appear next to my head.

"Mind if I join you?" he asks and positions himself in a shoulder stand next to me.

"Not at all," I say.

Drew is a recovering cult member with journalistic aspirations for the *Weekly World News*. He needs all the yogic clarity he can get. He turns his head toward me, his strawberry blond hair brushing the dirty ground. His hollow pale face almost looks normal with all the blood rushing into it. "What are you going to do after you get to Anchorage?"

"Live and never leave," I say matter of factly.

"With Randy and Kelsey," he says as though he just knows.

For someone who once told me in great detail about his alien abduction, he could have come up with a better ending than that. I give him a good hard shove with my leg and topple him over.

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Kelsey stands on the edge of the Grand Canyon. She wears a white skirt and no shoes. Randy snaps pictures of her. I walk out to the edge next to Kelsey, sit, and let my legs dangle over the side where the sun beats down on them. I tug on my drab green shorts that I rarely wear. Sun warming legs—my era of new sensations.

Down in the Canyon, a mule stumbles over a stone in its path, and the girl straddled on its back tightens her grip. White-water rafters bounce down the river like tiny yellow rubber ducks. From the southern rim of the Grand Canyon, it takes eight miles to hike down over rocky, barren terrain to the Colorado River. People hike to the

bottom for many reasons, but I narrow down the main reason to masochistic tendencies.

The sun beats down on pseudo-explorers who have no shade to hide under. They underestimate the harsh conditions, and most likely don't even consider the eight mile hike back until they reach the bottom. People die or come damn near close, but no one ever turns back early. The Grand Canyon is also the most famous suicide destination.

The *Death in the Grand Canyon* book is twice as thick as *Death in Yellowstone National Park*. If more people knew this fact, would tourists still remark on how grand it is?

Randy focuses his camera and zooms it in on Kelsey. She swings her hips a couple times to get her skirt waving for the picture. She tosses her long black hair over her browned bare shoulders, and she smiles wide. Randy and I have known each other for years; we know each other from another lifetime. We know what the other thinks without a word spoken. It's not fair that her existence in our lives weakens that connection. I knew Randy would inevitably find a serious girlfriend, but it didn't expect it to be when I needed him the most. An old monk I wandered upon meditating in a sacred river near Carmel Valley, California once told me that unhappiness is the direct result of trying to fight the Universe because no one fights the Universe and wins. Maybe the connection between Randy and me needs to be weakened for whatever purpose. The shutter clicks on Randy's camera. A memory captured. I try to picture Kelsey with an eye patch and a Canadian accent, but the image blurs until I no longer see her at all.

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Southern Utah. Our hike to Angel's Landing in Zion National Park surges an

energy through me—that surge of energy that comes from pushing my body to extremes. A middle-aged lady with vitality and a spark in her eye climbs down past us on our way up the rocky path.

“Didn't I pass you guys on the way up?” she turns back to us and asks.

“Yep,” Randy snaps without stopping. “We hike Angel's Landing three times a day.”

She glares at Randy for a moment then stares at me fiercely like she recognizes me and wonders why I don't recognize her. I try to place her, but the context isn't right. When your world is a never ending blur of people and places context just doesn't exist. Who is she? Why did Randy tell her we hike this trail three times a day? I've written down similar moments in my notebook that have occurred over the years. I've tried to make connections, but nothing ever adds up quite right. Old souls reunite in ways lost to us here and now, out of context. I will create context in my life. Anchorage, Alaska—where I will exist.

The three of us perch on the edge of Angel's Landing, our legs dangling over the side. The woman reappears and sits down next to me.

“This place never ceases to amaze me,” she says and shakes her head. “So many blends of color in these rocks. God must have had fun creating this.” She throws her arms into the air to punctuate her last statement. “It's fun finding yourself here,” she adds. Did she mean physically here in Zion or within the essence of where we are? Rugged rock formations surround us in every direction. My life in pattern.

The unusually humid night air sticks to my skin, the air swells with moisture,

ready to burst. It could be a storm stirring, but I hear no thunder, I see no lightening. Too many stars scatter the sky. We sleep outside our tents not far from the park. Randy and Kelsey lie stretched out on one side of the fire, and I lie on the other side. Through the dying embers of the fire, their bodies glow.

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Randy, Kelsey, and I spend three days hiking in Yellowstone.

“Everything looks so surrrrrreeeeal,” Kelsey says the morning we hike to the overlook of Grand Prismatic. From above, the giant hot spring is a tie-dyed sunburst of colors—blue in the center followed by greens, yellow, orange, red stretching out in all directions.

“Who needs psychedelics with an environment like this?” I say.

A young family with two small children who stand next to us give me the evil eye. Randy grabs my shoulder and shoves me into Kelsey then he backs away from us and climbs onto the remnants of a burnt tree. I get his point. He wants us to be close, but I can't promise anything.

“Did Randy ever tell you that we met here in Yellowstone, that we worked together here?” I ask Kelsey and gaze out over the colors of the hot spring.

“Of course,” she says and giggles like I'm some sort of freak for perhaps thinking otherwise. “Randy told me about all your travels. He told me you go where the wind blows you. He told me you dance to the beat of wild horses running.”

“He told you that?” It didn't sound like him at all. I claim to know Randy better than anyone I've ever met, but how well can you really claim to know someone you only



see briefly every several years?

“No.” Kelsey says and steps back with one big hysterical laugh. It's the longest conversation I've had with her since I've met her and the only one we've had without Randy. I sense she doesn't believe in my existence as much as I believe in hers.

The family next to us gives me another sideways glance. Kelsey lifts the camera around her neck and snaps a picture of them. They stare wide-eyed at the hot spring unaware of her motion. My arm brushes my side for a camera I once carried, now long lost.

“I'm going to travel the world and take pictures of tourists,” she says. “My coffee table book idea. *Flocks of Society*.”

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Dusk settles on the small town of Gardner, Montana at the north entrance into Yellowstone National Park, and I sit at the bar in the Two Bit Saloon. Randy and Kelsey wanted to spend a day alone in the park. I won't catch up with them until tomorrow evening in Bozeman. I push them to the back of my mind. I pretend I'm on my own again. The familiarity of Gardner and the bar sinks into my being. When you find yourself in the same situation again and again, it only feels familiar and not like *deja vu*. Because *deja vu* only occurs in situations you've never been in before. Not in this lifetime, not in this dimension anyway.

“What can I get you?” The bartender asks and sets a napkin in front of me—his voice gruff, his eyes old and full of stories.

I haven't had a drink in three years. But this is the start of a new life.

"A Jameson. On the rocks. A small glass of ginger ale on the side." I order slow as if it's the first time I'm ordering a drink at a bar. I savor the moment. Will my life in Alaska resemble this—alone in a bar while the only people I know are off on wild adventures for two? The whiskey tastes bitter on my tongue, more bitter than I remember. Do I want to drink this? My decision to quit drinking occurred as quickly as my decision to start again so why not? I tip the glass to my lips and chug the whiskey.

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I wake up at sunrise on a hillside overlooking Gardner. I stare out from the open flap of my tent and snuggle down into my sleeping bag further to shield myself from the sharp chill in the air. An overwhelming sense of fullness envelops me—my head full of whiskey, my car full of someone else's possessions, my life full of direction as vague as direction can be.

\*\*\*

I take my time driving to Bozeman. I pick up a baby faced hitchhiker just south of Mammoth Village and drive him a few miles to his camp.

"Thanks for the lift," he says and lugs his rucksack out of my car.

"No problem," I say. "I enjoy hitchhikers. Usually."

He turns to walk off, but then stops and opens a pouch in his bag. "Here," he says and hands me a small book—*Journey to the East*.

"Thanks," I say and grasp the book tight.

"No problem," he says. "One of those books that's good to keep in circulation, you know. Don't lose sight of the journey because destination doesn't really exist."

I lay the book where he sat moments before and watch him walk out of my life as quickly as he walked into it.

I stop in Big Sky along route 191 half way between West Yellowstone and Bozeman. Another old home to pay homage. I drive up to the base of Lone Mountain slow and take in all the switchbacks my car curves around. Snow still caps Lone Mountain as well as many of the surrounding peaks. Spring is off season. Nothing will be open. No one will be there. Not even the year round locals stick around during the off season, not many of them anyway. At the top, I make my way over to the Mountain Lodge—my old home for those few months. The Black Bear Bar and Grill sits just to the right side of it. I see a few people shuffling around the outside so I park and poke my head inside.

We see each other right away. Joshua stands behind the bar and nods at me. For some reason, my blood runs cold. I hardly knew Joshua aside from work related meetings and run-ins at parties. He was one of the few employees who stayed when the season ended. I had written down in an old notebook the idea that crossing paths with people from my past is usually some sort of sign. At another point I had written that crossing paths was meaningless coincidence. And then at another point I wrote that coincidences were only as full of as much meaning as you give them.

“How have you been?” I say rushing the bar.

“Pretty good,” he says and shrugs. “Living my dream. Just skiing all winter, partying all summer, working hard year round. How have you been?”

“Alright,” I say and plop onto the barstool like an old habit. “Heading to Alaska

with some friends. I think I might stay there for awhile. Sick of all the moving. I'm getting motion sickness."

Joshua lets out a half hearted laugh and turns his attention to the few customers scattered down the bar—old locals and new employees slowly filtering in for the summer season. He mixes a couple drinks, he serves a few beers, he doesn't move to my end of the bar again. I fade back toward the door. He hadn't even offered me a drink and after how many years? I step outside and walk back to my car. He hadn't recognized me. He had no goddamn clue who I was—just an old employee drifting back through town, a fleeting existence tumbling through someone's permanent existence.

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Bozeman, Montana floods my memory with all my experiences in the Northern Rockies. I pull my car over just outside of the city limits and watch the sun sink into the Bridger Mountains that cup the city. I drive slowly into town and stop at a small book shop where I'd spent so many hours wandering through. The wear and tear and chipped paint on the outside of the shop contrasts with the newness of the everything on the inside. I order a coffee out of habit though it's after dark, and I scan the shelves to pass time until I meet up with Randy and Kelsey.

A copy of *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* sits crooked on a display shelf. I bought the book years ago at this same book shop and read it slow and mindfully though very little of Robert Persig's philosophy stuck with me. I sip my coffee and flip through the pages. I haven't thought about the book in years. I skim over a few lines toward the end. *What sort of future is coming up from behind I don't really know. But*

*the past, spread out ahead dominates everything in sight.* I snap the book shut and leave.

I beat Randy and Kelsey to Montana Ale Works by an hour. I drink two Jameson on the rocks before they arrive. Slow sips, long observations. Not many people filter through the restaurant or the bar. The ones that do are mostly locals—I can tell by the faded blue jeans they wear, the worn baseball caps.

Persig's over-thinking got him electric-shock therapy. My over-thinking keeps me at a stalemate, and I do nothing until life decides my fate for me—a season ends and I am pushed out the door, my car breaks down and I am forced to stay. I can't make a goddamn decision on my own. But that is going to change. I will stay, I will stay, I will stay. I don't want to be dominated by my past, but no matter at what angle I try to see my reasons for staying, the past is all I see.

Randy and Kelsey walk through the door, and I order my third drink before they spot me.

“Game of cut-throat,” Kelsey says sliding up next to me, brushing her finger across my throat like a knife.

Cut-throat is the only game in pool designed for three players, the only game with such a violent name. The implications astound me, and I nearly choke on my drink.

“Yeah, I don't know why they named it after a fish either,” Randy says and smacks my back hard between my coughs.

Kelsey murders Randy and me—first me and then Randy.

“Not a lot to do in Juneau,” she says and shrugs at her quick win.

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“What do you plan to do once we get to Anchorage?” Randy asks as soon as Kelsey falls asleep.

I kick at the wood in our small fire pit. I can't decide if I'm surprised he brought it up so soon or at all. If Kelsey weren't around, he wouldn't have asked. That I am sure of.

“I...I think I'm going to stay in Anchorage,” I say and give Randy a hard look to make sure I read his immediate reaction correctly.

He stares at the fire. He stares at the fire and says nothing. He knew what I was going to say. Now he doesn't know how to tell me that I can't do that. I can't do that because Kelsey wouldn't like it. But he doesn't want to tell me the truth. So he sits and stares at the fire.

“Why do you want to stay in Anchorage?” His eyes don't leave the fire.

He knows the answer to this one too, but I humor him. “Why not?” I say. “I want to try to stay permanently. And I thought you could help.”

Randy glances at me. The light from the fire splotches across his face, and he suddenly becomes someone I don't recognize. But then my eyes focus, and he appears again. And again. And again.

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Missoula Montana—land of David Lynch and Moose Drool Beer. Randy and Kelsey chase each other around a University of Montana lawn. I lay in the grass not far from where they scamper, stare at the swirling clouds, and weigh my options. If I drive all the way to Anchorage, I'm staying. If any doubts arise, I'm not going any further. Does the fact I'm weighing options count as having doubts?

Randy lifts Kelsey over his head. She spreads out her arms, and he runs around with her like a toy airplane. Does she know about the time he picked me up like a toy airplane outside of a coffee house just south of the arctic circle? When Kelsey's bare feet hit the grass, she spins and spins away from Randy, her violet and white gypsy skirt flaring out and twisting with her body. Randy's eyes shift from Kelsey to me. He smiles that smile that is so familiar to me, and I know that he doesn't mind if I stay in Anchorage. I know that he would try to be my anchor as well as Kelsey's boyfriend. But then it would be a matter of time before one of us would tilt that delicate balance.

"Up for some fly-fishing?" Randy says and points toward one of the many rivers that surrounds the UM campus and the town.

The mechanics of fly-fishing are a lot like meditating—the rhythmic motion of the fly rod as it is cast and moves along the surface of the water, the stillness of the water even when it is moving over rocks and around bends. The counts become mantras—sa ta na ma instead of one two three four. The eyes focus on the fly instead of the chin or the third eye point. And everything in the world stops and the mind becomes clear clear clear as the water smooths over the stones and fallen logs.

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The evening Randy and Kelsey stuff the remaining items into their truck from my car, I buy a plant from a local market—a simple green plant unrecognizable to me. The warm Missoula air comforts me, soft music plays from the motel behind us.

"Are you sure this is what you want to do?" Randy asks, his voice concerned, his eyes wide.

I nod and he smiles. Nothing else needs to be said between us.

I could head out in any direction from here. That is what I always did when there was no need to stay. I could head west out of town on Route 12 into Idaho along the Lachsa River, I could head north into Glacier National Park, I could head back south through the Rockies, I could head east toward the Badlands. Or I could simply stay.

The western sky turns a deep orange as the evening settles further into night. The stars pop out of the light into dark one by one and then in clusters filling the sky. I lean back against the door of my car and listen hard to the soft music coming from the motel front desk doorway. One of those Tori Amos songs that always surprises me when I hear it coming from someone else's stereo. *Hey Jupiter*. Jupiter, God of good fortune, God of expansion, God of wisdom. Hey Jupiter, what have I learned? Am I any wiser? *Hey Jupiter nothing's been the same...*